



## ผู้ชายข้างเท้าหน้า ผู้หญิงข้างเท้าหลัง

*Husband is elephant's front legs, wife is elephant's hind legs*

An investigation into the ways in which culture can create vulnerabilities for stateless women, in Northern Thailand.

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By: Deirdre Brennan

Student Number: 3945847

First Reader: Dr. Eva Midden

Second Reader: Dr. Sandra Ponzanesi

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No person mentioned here is responsible for the errors in the study. That honour is mine.

Deirdre Brennan,  
Waterford,  
August 2013.

*What is really initiated here is a colonization of the body by the discourse of power.*

*This is writing that conquers*

(Certeau, 1988)

## ABSTRACT

Interpretations of non-native cultures can reify images of non-Western people, especially women, in need of salvation and sophistication by the West. This thesis works through the implications of investigating a non-native culture by investigating ways in which Thai culture can create vulnerabilities for stateless women in Thailand. The over-arching theoretical framework is set down initially, with a comprehensive appeal to both feminist and post-colonial issues. Discourses of difference emerge as the findings show the opinions of informants to be shaped differently depending on their backgrounds and experiences. Such differences are presented here without an attempt to unify or paper-over conflicting and contradictory voices. The evidential data comes both from Thai women who have experienced the issues concerned and from a large number of key informants surveyed by The Thailand Project being run under the auspices of The Statelessness Programme at Tilburg University Law School. Statelessness emerges as a key factor, alongside gender, in determining people's quality of life. The first-hand witness material will challenge conventional Western generalisations and meta-narratives about women in Thailand being bound by an oppressive culture, about 'bun khun' and about the deleterious effect of modernisation. The study will ask if binaries such as 'woman as victim of culture' versus 'woman as resistant to tradition' need be so polarized, and will find that there is great value in webbing such discourses for the benefit of the subjects.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Overview of the problem.....	2
Research question and aim.....	3
Introduction to my position as a researcher.....	3
Methodology introduction.....	4
Special consideration.....	5
Thesis Structure.....	5
Chapter Two: Context.....	6
The Economy.....	7
The Historical Position of Women in Thai Culture.....	7
Bun Khun บุญคุณ.....	10
Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework.....	12
Theories of Representation.....	13
Structures and Agency.....	17
Standpoint Theory and Situated Knowledges.....	21
Intersectionality.....	25
Chapter Four: Methodology.....	28
The Thailand Project.....	29
Mixed Method Approach.....	29
Dataset Analysis.....	31
Interviews.....	32
Chapter Five: Data Analysis and Discussion.....	35
Introduction.....	36
Intersections in the Position of Women.....	37
The “Old” Culture of ‘Bun Khun’.....	46
The “New” Culture of Modernity.....	52
Discourses of Difference: Modernity and Tradition.....	55
Chapter Six: Conclusion .....	59
Bibliography.....	63



CHAPTER ONE

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Overview of the problem

On a global level, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that there are up to 12 million stateless people (UNHCR, 2013). To be stateless is to be without legal ties to any nation and thus without citizenship. Statelessness is a fundamental denial of basic human rights and obvious implications for this status include denial of access to employment, property, travel, health-care and education. In Thailand the stateless population is estimated at just over half a million (UNHCR, 2013). A significant cause of the size of the stateless population is due to the fact that hill tribe people missed out on the census conducted in the 1950s: because of their remote and difficult to access domicile location they were overlooked by authorities. Although a huge number of stateless people in Thailand have lived there for several decades they remain not recognised as citizens. Consequently their children, although born on Thai soil, were barred from the ‘jus soli’<sup>1</sup> entitlement to Thai nationality. The government made an encouraging reformation of the law in 2008 to ensure every person living in Thailand, born there before 1992, has the right to obtain citizenship. Implementation has not caught up with the regulation however because to prove one was born on Thai soil before 1992 can be extremely difficult. Due to stateless people’s restricted movement and lack of access to formal employment in Thailand they are commonly a target group for human trafficking prevention work. However a well-documented correlation between being stateless and being vulnerable to becoming a victim of human trafficking has not been made.

I first encountered the statelessness issue while interning in Northern Thailand with a human trafficking prevention organisation. Following on with my interest in ameliorating the position of stateless people I began an internship with The Statelessness Programme at Tilburg University Law School. The Programme had recently developed ‘The Thailand Project’ (hereafter ‘TTP’) to research into the impact of statelessness on women in Thailand, aiming to specifically map the link between statelessness and human trafficking. Part of my duties as an intern on that project was to transcribe interviews that had been conducted with key informants. During this process I noticed a trend in the discussions around the topic of ‘*bun khun*’. Simply put ‘*bun khun*’ is the innate belief that children should make merit to their parents, i.e. contribute in some way to their welfare, out of obligation and respect (Potter, 1977). Many informants believed ‘*bun khun*’ is a significant factor in the vulnerabilities of

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<sup>1</sup> Jus Soli definition: Where nationality is acquired automatically, documents are typically not issued by the State as part of the mechanism. In such cases, it is generally birth registration that provides proof of place of birth and thereby provides evidence of acquisition of nationality by jus soli. (UNHCR, 2103)

stateless women and the root causes of human trafficking. Within certain discourses it is firmly thought that women and young girls bear the majority of responsibility for improving the financial situation of the family, especially in Northern Thailand and other rural areas where traditions and customs continue to thrive.

## Research question and aim

This thesis is centred on the question; in what way do cultural expectations increase the vulnerabilities of stateless women in Northern Thailand? I would like to concentrate specifically on how women relate to culture today, in regard to their position in a society that has been described as male dominated (Rojanaphruk, 2013), and in regard to women's relationship with 'bun khun'. The focus of this research is on relationships of women with culture, and it is hoped that it will benefit the Tilburg University Statelessness Programme's planned pilot intervention strategy. The intervention strategy in question is currently in development and plans to be implemented in the summer/autumn of 2013 in a community in Northern Thailand. The chief goal of the intervention strategy is to address the impact of statelessness on women in Thailand, through a focus on improving their sense of legal empowerment and decreasing their vulnerability to human trafficking. My thesis intends to illuminate a very culturally-specific angle that needs consideration when implementing any future intervention strategies. The research is a response to the calls from NGO workers who continuously state the potentially harmful aspects of 'bun khun'. Ultimately, knowing whether this hypothesis is true or not will add to the potential of the intervention strategy in addressing the needs of women in Thai society, as outlined by the women themselves.

## Introduction to my position as a researcher

A disciplinary background in international development ignited my passion for working cross-culturally. Feminist studies have been influential in causing me to reflect on the implications of such work and on how to persevere with development work but in a conscious manner that avoids the all-knowing attitude towards subjects. There are highly sensitive issues to take into account when representing non-native cultures, therefore I aim to portray this work, where possible, from the standpoint of my target group. Feminist research practices emphasise the importance of engaging the voice of the target group: they are the key actors in their enablement (Brooks, 2007). It is possible that voicing the experiences of



native Thai women will challenge assumptions on the position of women in Thailand. It is vital that the stateless women define their own issues and concerns to generate a much more needs-based intervention strategy. Using a feminist epistemology like standpoint theory can create knowledge, free from the grand narratives on issues of Thai culture. This epistemological method will be implemented through Skype interviews with young women in Thailand. As a feminist researcher it is an interesting challenge to investigate a culture that is not native to my own. The intricacies of such a position will be unravelled in the Theoretical Framework chapter as I look at the arguments for and against conducting research as an “outsider”. Feminist work strives to be cognisant of patriarchy, power and difference and I will offer a feminist perspective to the work of the Statelessness Programme and TTP. I believe the merging of feminist studies with development work is vital to circumvent the ‘modern-day colonialism’ argument being used against such crucial development work.

## Methodology introduction

Tackling this investigation will initially mean inspecting what are the cultural expectations and gender norms for women in Thailand according to literature on the subject. I will seek the opinions of young women currently residing in Northern Thailand on their feelings about gender roles in Thailand today through a series of Skype interviews. The questions will be centred on the topic of ‘bun khun’ and the position of women in Thai society. In addition to that qualitative research I will use quantitative data collected through the Thailand Project’s questionnaires to investigate the difference between stateless people and people with Thai nationality on matters of their sense of life satisfaction, financial issues and desire to travel. The qualitative and quantitative data will be presented alongside one another throughout the Data Analysis chapter. Both types of data will be analysed through use of the theories I have outlined in the Theoretical Framework chapter, including mainly feminist and post-colonial scholarship.

## Special consideration

Situated at a central location of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, Thailand’s cultures and customs have been influenced by the neighbouring South East Asian countries. The multiple

ethnic groups in Thailand interconnect and share many similarities. This research is not focused on the culture of one ethnic minority in particular, or solely on the traditional customs of ethnic Thai people. It encapsulates the broad-spectrum of cultures in Thailand as a geographical region. However this means there is room for much more detailed research that would expose the very group-specific differences among hill tribe communities and Thai citizens.

## Thesis Structure

This research will begin with an overview of the Thai context, taking an in-depth look at traditions and customs both from a historical perspective and a contemporary viewpoint. The Methodology Chapter which follows outlines a detailed account of the processes adopted by me and also by the Thailand Project team during their research in Thailand. The Theoretical Framework Chapter follows that with extensive insights into the central theories being used for data analysis, beginning with an examination of the politics of representation and continuing with an outline of the work done by Michel de Certeau on structures and agency. These theories are chosen to reflect the dialogue at play throughout this study, firstly who can speak for whose culture and second is there a resistance to cultural norms present in Thailand today? The second half of the Theoretical Framework Chapter is concerned with feminist approaches to research – standpoint theory, situated knowledges and the theory of intersectionality. The Data Analysis and Discussion Chapter is a presentation of the qualitative and quantitative data under four main topics: Intersections in the position of women, the “old” culture of ‘bun khun’, the “new” culture of modernity, and discourses of difference – modernity and tradition. Finally, the thesis is completed by the Conclusion chapter.



CHAPTER TWO

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# CONTEXT

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## The Economy

Thailand's economic state has developed at an exorbitant rate since the 2000s. The growth rate is reflected across all axis of poverty, development, manufacturing, tourism and foreign direct investment. The World Bank upgraded the income categorization of Thailand from a lower-middle income economy to an upper-middle income economy in July 2011 (World Bank, 2013). This is due in large part to the significant reduction in poverty and the Gross National Income almost doubling within a decade. However this is not to say it has been spread evenly across all sectors or territories. Thailand continues to be inflicted with high income inequality. The World Bank has noted that the North and Northeast in particular are lagging behind the rest of the country in terms of poverty reduction (World Bank, 2013). World Development Indicators show there has been a vast increase in the number of out-of-school children of primary school age throughout Thailand. The numbers have risen by over 100,000 between 2006 and 2009, with females exceeding males to a slight degree (World Bank, 2013). There are undoubtedly many additional indicators capable of giving an overview of the state of Thailand's economy, but this brief synopsis provides an indication of the economic and social situation there. Both income and education have been included as I believe that these are catalysts for the choices and practices of people in northern Thailand.

## The Historical Position of Women in Thai Culture

### Introduction

Ben Highmore asserts that Michel de Certeau's ideas are crucial for thinking about the ethical considerations of doing cultural studies (2001). De Certeau's work on writing cultures has been highly influential in my approach to the portrayal and examination of Thai culture. His work is something I will return to in greater detail later. For now the relevance of Certeau's work lies in his statement that "plurality is originary" (1984, p. 133) which is explained by Highmore, in his 2007 paper, as meaning that social life is a heteroglossia of many voices, competing and conflicting, and a constantly changing social world (p. 21). This means I cannot or will not attempt to create a monological picture of culture and societal relations in Thailand. Not only is there a rapidly changing social life but as Highmore puts it, "the radical plurality of an individual can offer a vivid indication of the difficult potential of writing the

ordinary” (2001, p. 260). Despite these limitations I have attempted here to represent a concise indication of cultural life and the position of women in Thailand, both today and in the past.

#### Equality in the 1970s?

Despite the ever-changing form of culture and customs, their present form does not come from nowhere. It is important to capture the historical context of cultures and older societal expectations, since aspects of the past permeate the present. In the mid-1970s, Sulamith Heins Potter spent one year living in a village in Chiang Mai, conducting an anthropological study on family life in northern Thailand. She observed that men were redistributed around women’s families: the family structure is a system in which lineality is traced through women. However this does not mean that the northern Thai family structure is matrifocal: there is an ideological dominance of men and a “higher social status and formal authority of the men” (Potter, 1977, p. 20). Despite the structural importance of women Potter states that “in northern Thailand the woman is not dominant” (p. 21).

#### Equality in the 1990s?

Kabilsingh, a self-proclaimed Thai feminist says that the subordinate position of women in Thailand “was aptly summed up in the popular expression ‘women are the hind legs of the elephant’” (1991, p.14), a saying also highlighted by Potter several years earlier. One of the key components of Thai culture is the heavy influence of Buddhism, since in Thailand, 97% of the population consider themselves Buddhist.<sup>2</sup> Exploitation in any form is accepted and justified “on the basis of karma” (Kabilsingh, 1991, p. 16). Kabsilingh frames this as exploitation of women although the same could also be said for men. Kabilsingh contextualises the position of women in Thailand: “Historically, the training and social conditioning of Thai women has been aimed at producing ‘good women’...it has been accepted for many years that Thai women do not have critical or intellectual capacities and that women are the ‘weaker sex,’...[their function is] to serve and please men” (1991, p. 13). This historical positioning of women has resonances the world over, but Kabilsingh goes on

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<sup>2</sup> Religion of Thailand statistics, available at: <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/th-thailand/rel-religion>

to say that “Thai women *continue* to be suppressed in economics, politics and culture” [emphasis mine]. Kabilsingh does not appear confident that there has been a substantial constructive shift on the view towards women. Her descriptions of women in Thailand are from the early 1990s when she believed “most negative gender biases [were] still fully operative in Thai society” (p. 15). From the 1970s to the 1990s both Potter and Kabsilingh have observed the subordinate position of women in Thai society.

### Equality Today?

In May of this year, an article was published in Thailand’s English-language daily newspaper addressing recent misogynistic events that have been part of the current political divide there:

“Since the situation is most unlikely to improve anytime soon, Thai society should at least try to understand why a number of men and even women keep using sexist words and stereotypical remarks that perpetuate the notion that women are innately inferior and dishonourable.”

(Rojanaphruk, 2013)

In this one sentence Rojanaphruk sums up what Potter observed over her one year stint in northern Thailand in the 1970s: women are viewed as inferior. He even describes it as a “culture of male domination”. Rojanaphruk holds a pessimistic view about improvements in the situation. Not only does he believe progress is unlikely anytime soon but he highlights the fact that this has long been a core part of Thai discourse:

Deep-rooted misogyny in our language...It is embedded in the very foundation of our language and will require conscious efforts to transform Thai language into a more gender-sensitive tongue.

(Rojanaphruk, 2013)

The overview here of women’s position in Thailand, is brief, reaching back only as far as the 1970s. However Kabilsingh utilises a corpus of centuries-old literature that highlights the subordination of women in Thai society, pointing to exactly what Rojanaphruk means when he says “deep-rooted”.

In spite of a historical oppressive attitude towards women it has been noted that women in Thailand experience a high degree of autonomy. It is significant that to Mary Beth Mills, Thai women's levels of autonomy appear quite favourable only when compared with "women in more rigidly patriarchal cultures in other parts of Asia" (1997). Mills sees this autonomy as being confined to their positions as economic actors and household decision makers (1997, p. 40). Mills pronounces this autonomy to be concomitant with marriage, motherhood and increased age (1997).

### Bun Khun បុណ្យកុណ

'Bun khun' simply put is a filial obligation. Dr. Panitee Suksomboon explains that ties between parents and children are characterized by this "asymmetrical reciprocity" (2008). In return for a parent giving birth to a child, raising them and caring for them, the child, upon reaching adulthood must "repay meritorious debt to their parents through a life-long obligation, by providing finances, physical care and emotional support to them" (Pongpaichit, 1982 cited in Suksomboon, 2008). Suksomboon, who carried out a yearlong study on Thai migrant women in the Netherlands, states bluntly that "a greater expectation to undertake regular support towards the parents is placed upon the daughter" (p. 471). He also emphasises the fact that for a migrant, financial support is a "crucial means to fulfil familial responsibility", a migrant is not able to complete day-to-day physical care of elderly parents.

Mills (1997) examines the practice of 'bun khun' among young migrant women in Thailand. She explains that aside from the desire to travel and to be a modern woman, labour migration "invokes obligations of respect and gratitude owed by all children to their parents" and "an important means for youth to acknowledge their debts to parents by earning money to send home" (1997, p. 42). Crucial here is Mills's point that labour migration is even more significant for young women as they cannot earn merit for their parents through monkhood, something young men can do. Without the ability to make merit through entering monkhood it appears that 'bun khun' is gendered in such a way that it puts women under greater financial hardship and vulnerable as a result. Mills reports that "by sending money back to parents and siblings they can maintain their standing within the home community as good women and daughters" (1997, p. 44). The custom of 'bun khun' is intricately woven within

migration decisions and is also embedded in the idea of being a 'good woman'. Descriptions of the practise of 'bun khun' were highlighted in accounts of human trafficking incidents that the Foundation for Women<sup>3</sup> put together in a booklet in 2012. The accounts described women's initial decisions to migrate. The author, Roongwitoo, describes the case of Nan who was trafficked in 2006 and who "came from the Northeast and, like many other women, shouldered heavy family responsibility" (2012, p.13). The link between filial obligation and risk to exploitation is not explicitly made but the author's sentiment is clear.

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<sup>3</sup> The Foundation for Women (FFW) is a non-governmental organisation based in Bangkok, Thailand. The assistance of FFW is targeted towards women who are most disadvantaged, primarily those vulnerable to human trafficking and victims of domestic abuse. More information available at: [http://www.womenthai.org/eng/?page\\_id=2](http://www.womenthai.org/eng/?page_id=2)





CHAPTER THREE

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# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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In the chapter presented here I will explore four theories pertinent to my research: Theories of Representation, Structure and Agency, Standpoint Theory and Situated Knowledges, and Intersectionality.

## Theories of Representation

*Feminist movements must be open to rethinking and self-reflexivity as an ongoing process if we are to avoid creating new orthodoxies that are exclusionary and reifying. The issue of who counts as a feminist is much less important than creating coalitions based on the practices that different woman use in various locations to counter the scattered hegemonies that affect their lives.*

(Grewal & Kaplan, 1994)

### Introduction

The insider/outsider debate has been disputed amongst feminist circles since as far back as the 1980s. These debates were largely as a result of the ignorance to difference amongst women and essentialist claims of the Second Wave Feminist movement. Susan Moller Okin describes the influence of those debates as more than somewhat inhibiting many feminists from “writing anything, especially about third World Women, that was not entirely contextualized and localized in its focus” (Okin, 1998, p. 43). Feminists like Okin may persist with the view that respecting cultural differences is a euphemism for denying women’s rights (1998, p. 36), but I believe this continues to be an important issue for reflection by a feminist researcher, not only because tensions are productive but also because it is advisable to avoid polarizing oneself on one side of this argument. Within this section I will tease out the necessary considerations for a Western feminist working across a cultural border. The aim of exploring theories of representation is to lay the foundations for my approach in the analysis of cultural expectations in Thailand, a country to which I am a non-native.

## Insider or Outsider?

Accusations of modern day colonialism is frequently used to attack outsider intervention. However, McLeer (1998) cleverly uses a colonial ideology to defend outsider intervention. McLeer states that refusal to intervene in women's issues in the Nonwestern world is an easy way out for the liberal feminist. She goes on to say that it is "a further replication of the colonial conception of authenticity and 'native' purity" (McLeer 1998, p. 52). This is a strong defence as it turns the argument on its head by reminding us not to reinforce an orientalist view of a traditionalist native 'Other'. Uma Narayan has warned that the insistence on attending to differences, while it avoids essentialism about women, actually replicates "problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between 'Western culture' and 'Non-western cultures' and the women who inhabit them" (2000, p. 81). This furthers McLeer's point and forces us to consider the binaristic potential of maintaining 'borders' between feminism which can reinforce a 'them over there' ideology. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) elaborates her vision in her book "Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity". In it she explains that the title does not mean a "border-less feminism", but rather it means that we have to immerse ourselves in the fact of borders existence. In the recommendation for moving around and between borders perhaps we can accept Jaggar's argument for Western feminists to seek ways of becoming allies with Nonwestern women (1998). These theories encourage me as a cross-cultural researcher to become engaged with the presence of borders, and in doing so, attempt to lessen the patriarchal nature of the relationship between a researcher and the researched. As the Methodology Chapter will show, the interviews I conducted for this research were with friends of mine, responding to Jaggar's call for creating alliances. In light of the nature of researcher relationships there is further thought for reflection: how can I, as a researcher, mediate the voices of my subjects?

## Can the subaltern speak?

The act of research, be it by an insider or an outsider, is heavily convoluted with Gayatri Spivak's notorious brainchild, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Michel de Certeau foreshadowed this thought through his belief that "the intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people" (1984, p. 25). Within research there is an unavoidable act of repression, the subject will be positioned as less than equal to the researcher. Trinh Minh-

Ha's critique of "factual authenticity" asserts that any attempt to authenticate work by including the Other's voice results in the Other never truly forming the Voice of the study (1991, p. 67). My response to this is that as an outsider looking in I am the over-arching narrator; despite including voices from the women in Thailand, the outsider is speaking. The subaltern speaks through me, I mediate the discourse. Feminist research practice like Harding's "standpoint theory" asserts that research is participatory between both the research and the researcher, but Minh-ha reminds us that this 'shared power' is only "partly shared, and with much caution, and on the condition that the share is *given*, not taken" (1991, p. 67). This is a reminder to remain aware of power dynamics, not only while conducting interviews but more importantly through one's representation of a non-native culture. In light of this, self-reflection is an important research process: for me, how does my disciplinary background, economic state and Western environment influence my perspective throughout the findings analysis? Not only is personal reflection important but it's also crucial to practice such mindfulness on the positions of my research subjects: why they make their life choices and how. Calling on Adrienne Rich's "Notes on Politics of Location" (1985) helps me to deeply reflect on how my identity shapes my perspective. It is not enough to state that I am White, Western and a women conducting research in a non-native country. But as Rich would insist, it is valuable to reflect profoundly on how this subsection of my identity make-up shapes my perspective. I have preconceived ideas on how embracing one's culture is an important component of our lives but I also believe that one should enjoy the choice to be free from the misogynistic aspects of cultures. From time to time, whilst living in Ireland I experience a deep-rooted, institutionalized sexism here, one that is influenced by the strong presence of Catholicism and our historically male-run governments. This personal experience has encouraged me to embrace feminism as a catalyst for women to free themselves from derogatory cultures. Feminism has also taught me to allow alternative perspectives to thrive, perspectives that welcome their own culture and do not see it as inherently harmful or misogynistic, but something that is very personal and valued. With all of this in mind I approach my research on culture cognisant of the ways culture can enhance people's lives. But I also bear in mind that there is a subordinating potential of culture to remain watchful of, and I will proceed with my investigation into Thai culture stimulated by these beliefs.

## Conclusion

This thesis is not being presented under the pretence that it is unpolluted by my own personal social, economic and political concerns. I will neither be defeated by the criticism of cross-cultural feminism, nor will I drive full force ahead with my research in the belief that anybody has the capacity to research anything. But all sides of this debate serve as a cautionary guide. Insider versus outsider is caught in a binary of good versus bad. The most constructive thing one can do is blur the lines between the two poles, taking the importance of both sides into consideration when moving forward rather than prolonging the battle. Into my research I incorporate Sandra Harding's standpoint theory and Donna Haraway's situated knowledges to assist in overcoming the far-from-trivial considerations in this debate. I will return to both authors and their theories at a later point within this chapter. For now I will move towards focusing on the structures and institutions of power that create webs of social inequality and how these webs are being resisted.

## Structures and Agency

### Introduction

Within the last section I elaborated on the issues of representing non-native cultures, but working in a cross-cultural setting is far more convoluted than simply reflecting on the question of ‘Should I be an insider or an outsider?’ This section is concerned with working through the theories on relations between society, structures and culture. Michel de Certeau’s vast investigation into writing culture has been influential in my research. His approach to writing about everyday life remains at the core of my method for addressing culture because of his interest in resistance to structures and cultures. His work is of great importance as it offers a different perspective to the Foucauldian belief that human beings are victims to structures and only maintain very limited agency within society. Investigating structures is crucial to research such as mine which looks at the ways in which women relate to their native culture. How are young Thai women defined or shaped by their filial, local or national institutions? Do young Thai women exhibit agency within their communities?

Socialization theory supposes, amongst other behaviours, that gender formation is “an acquisition and internalisation of social norms” (Connell, 1987, p. 191). It is, however, my opinion that socialization theory cannot provide the whole picture for human behaviour. Socialization is important as a foundational theory to this section’s discussion of our relation to society, nevertheless it does not account much for agency. Michel de Certeau plays a significant contributory role in the elaboration of agency within structures. His theories will be outlined here so as to investigate the presence of agency or resistance within women’s relationships with families, culture, society and the economy in Thailand. This is important as I look at how women experience ‘bun khun’, and whether or not it is seen as harmful by women themselves in Thailand.

### The Retrieval of Agency

Certeau moves beyond a sole reliance on the theories of structuralism to create an optimistic take on mechanisms of discipline. For feminist academia his retrieval of agency within the systems of power asserts that women (or men) are not bound by the limits of patriarchy. For this study the retrieval of agency challenges the hypothesis put forward by TTP key

informants that women are susceptible to or bound by the custom of ‘bun khun’. Seeking out ways in which women assert agency also helps move past the colonial rhetoric that Non-western women are victims of their culture. Ben Highmore (2007) describes Certeau as an antidote to the pessimistic network of power. In Certeau’s famous “The Practice of Everyday Life” he uses two central terms to differentiate between the powers that exist in city life: “tactics” and “strategies” (1984). Tactics are the wandering trajectories taken by us, the consumers, who follow our own logic. Certeau believes that although we remain “subordinated to the prescribed syntactical forms” our trajectories are designed by our own interests and not determined by systems (1984, p. xix). The strategies are the structures and institutes of power where tactics insinuate themselves fragmentarily, never taking them over in their entirety. This tactic of temporally taking over a space or structure is, for Certeau, an act of resistance, a deflection of power. It is through this relationship between “tactics” and “strategies” that agency is granted back to the subject. I aim to apply this theory whilst examining Thai women and their relationship to culture. The use of this theory is not necessarily to seek their modes of resistance in ‘every-day practices’ as Certeau does, but on a wider scale of their life choices; what tactics do women employ to use a strategy against its heteronormative construction, the strategy in this case being their culture? The tactics are their life choices. These life choices have been described by TTP key informants as migration decisions, how to provide for their family, how to uphold customary traditions and also how to become an independent and modern woman.

## Resistance

Heteroglossia, which describes the multiple voices undercutting attempts to unify culture, side-steps a totalizing structuralist point of view. It asserts that there is an unlimited diversity in the operations of people. Morris (2004) would describe such operations as “heterogeneous assemblages”. Heteroglossia is not simply a fused force against social governance or power structures, it too resides as an antagonistic force between group members. This means rather than a back-and-forth confrontation between people and structures there is also a web of confrontation that makes up any culture or society. This is useful when positing relations between the individual and culture: instead of looking for the grander scale of domination I will remain open to tensions that permeate at an ‘equal’ level throughout a community. In the case of this research it is worth looking at tensions amongst family members on topics such

as family obligation. Moreover within Thai society, which is often described as a very face-driven society, keeping up appearances within the community is also worthy of investigation: what sort of pressure does keeping up with neighbours place on the main provider of the family? Morris reminds us that while practices can be resistant they may still be mediated by interactions with the various groups around us (2004, p. 680). He uses Tony Bennett's argument that resisting one power may be simply following another order, for example a religious institution or neighborhood (Bennett, 1998 cited in Morris, 2004, p. 680). This creates room to hypothesize the resistance of traditional customs by women in northern Thailand: has something or someplace shaped their resistance and does this resistance follow another order? The deconstruction of following different orders is a fruitful response to the elements of cultural studies that are often criticized for being "a discipline concerned with 'tracking down resistances' and, once it has found them, taking their side" (Bennett, 1998, cited in Morris, 2004, p. 679). One should consider what to do after tracking down resistance; what are the economic, social and cultural issues associated with each resistance? How can this discovery of resistance be utilized in a nuanced manner so as to develop something more than simply 'taking their side'. As Thailand simmers at a transitional space, improving immensely in economic terms, it is important to look at the ways in which customs can fade with the adoption of modernization. Is 'becoming modern' a rejection of traditions and a form of resistance according to the women I have interviewed? Can traditions, like 'bun khun', ever be wholly rejected, or isn't it more likely that they re-emerge and take on a new form with the evolution of consumerism and modernization?

### Articulation

The theory of 'tactics' can lead us into a falsified notion that anything can be resistant and that agency can be granted to a subject amongst their surrounding institutes of power. Rather than viewing the relationship between the body and culture (or society) as dichotomous, where one term is honored over the other, Brian Morris (2004) applies Elizabeth Grosz's theory of a "two-way linkage" to strengthen Certeau's theory. Grosz implies that there are temporary alignments and disparate flows between bodies and cities, and that these meetings are always contingent. This is important to consider in this study when investigating the resistance of culture: nothing is intrinsically resistant. It is how the practice is *articulated* that determines whether or not it is resistant against a power or structure. While investigating a



woman's choice to move from a rural community to a large city, or by looking at whether or not she abides by customary norms, there needs to be an investigation of circumstances and even personalities. It is the motive, or to use Morris's term *articulation*, that makes conditional alignments of resistance from the body to culture. Saba Mahmood puts forward the idea that agency does not necessarily have to include resistance (Mahmood, 2005 referenced in Midden, forthcoming). In my research I look at Thai women's attitudes to culture in a way that moves past a binary of resistant or not. I investigate women's attitudes and actions in a way that is more inclusive of their personal circumstances, the rationalisations of their decisions and the backgrounds they come from that have helped shape their actions.

## Conclusion

Socialization theory is important to help us think about the effects of our environment on our everyday practices or behaviours. However Certeau can be used to take that theory and move it forward to a nuanced level. His rebirth of agency within Foucauldian-like structures of power is where I have found his work most fruitful. We may not be without the structures that surround us but it remains crucial not to dismiss the individually-determined trajectories taken by us the 'consumers', following our own logic. The critiques of Certeau by Highmore and Morris have been valuable for pinpointing Certeau's limitations and suggesting how to surmount them. Perhaps the resistance described by Certeau essentially follows another order or structure, implying that further investigation is required. Once resistance has been tracked down, the study should begin to question what should be done with such a discovery and what can this discovery lead to. Last of all I must bear in mind throughout my investigation that just because an act may be *seen* as resistant to cultural norms does not mean that it is inherently so. An act of resistance can only be determined as such by the agent.

## Standpoint Theory and Situated Knowledges

*I do not intend to speak about, just speak near by*<sup>4</sup>

### Introduction

Craig Calhoun reminds us of the rise of the universalistic project and how it meant that one could not say with pride “that one was partial” (1995, p. 162). But critique of universalism rose, and Marx sought to show that the so-called ‘universal man’ was only the concept of a bourgeois man, and not the working man (Calhoun, 1995, p. 163). The move away from the all-knowing scientific subject and the rise of standpoint theory began long before it became synonymous with Sandra Harding. Harding has been influential in the feminist appropriation of standpoint theory and in plunging the experiences of women into the meta-discourse. There has been an evolution of standpoint theory through to situated knowledges that will be outlined here. Donna Haraway’s work on accountability and awareness of partiality bears an importance that has helped to shape this study. Both standpoint epistemology and situated knowledges are an antidote to criticism against cross-cultural research, they value voicing women’s experiences and avoiding grand narratives on ‘Other’ cultures.

### Sandra Harding

Dorothy Smith preceded Sandra Harding somewhat with ideas on standpoint epistemologies. She argued that to conduct research, the researcher is a participant in the dialogue between equals rather than operating “as authority or agent of bureaucratic power” (Calhoun, 1995, p. 168). Calhoun elaborates on standpoint’s characteristic exchange of knowledge. The theory uses experience to produce certain sorts of knowledge and attempts to move away from research that of itself produces repression (1995). Standpoint theory is primarily interested in considering the experiences of women to be a source of knowledge and an instrument for transforming the narrating discourse which excludes them. This study, although mediated through me as the narrator, is a platform for women from northern Thailand. It is a study primarily focused on women and thus concerned with their experiences, as expressed by them. To invoke the standpoint of women is another addition to a knowledge-forming process. Standpoint theory is centred on the belief that a collective articulation of marginally

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<sup>4</sup> A passage of Joola music from Trinh Minh-Ha’s documentary “*Reassemblage*”, 1982.

produced knowledge (in this case from women and stateless persons) will benefit the objectivity attempted through traditional knowledge production. Through my research The Thailand Project receives the addition of women's experiences for the benefit of their intervention strategy.

Grounding this research in the experiences of women in Thailand does exactly what standpoint theory calls for. There is a minute portion of the discourse in the literature on Thai customs and interrelations with culture that includes the voices of women, and even far less discourse on Thai stateless women's experiences. Rather than searching for commonalities, it is the partial and embodied knowledge that is of more interest to this study: getting specific and getting personal with women in Thailand about their experiences with culture. By maintaining that it is the insider who has the strongest capacity for knowledge production, a relationship can be created between insider and outsider that will produce knowledge from an insider's lived experiences. Also, the interviewees selected for this research have differing citizenship status and ethnicities and, affected by such, each can inform the research from a position that is unique. Standpoint theory draws from the experiences of these intersecting identities to highlight the multifaceted subjectivities in existence, and produce information that is specific and can shatter generalisations.

### Critique of Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory is not without its problems. Calhoun (1995), deliberating on Charles Lemerts' phrase "the unresolved riddle of the standpoint", wonders if standpoint theory ultimately essentializes through its ideology that the experience of women can claim an adequate basis for knowledge? Incorporating the voice and standpoint of a select number of stateless women in Thailand is not held up within this thesis as the source of a widely-renowned shared experience or a shared oppression. The question arises of 'whose women's lives are being thought from?', and it is crucial to avoid masking power differences between stateless women in northern Thailand. As Highmore reminds us, Certeau used a polemological approach to include all cultural writing so as not to privilege an "authentic voice of the people" (2001, p. 259). Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges" strengthens the capacity of standpoint theory as it does not remain rigid about a route to the 'real'. In doing so it can circumvent generalizations on categories of woman or marginalized groups. Situated

knowledges succeeded Harding's important work on standpoint theory, and this is the reason that the theories follow each other here.

Donna Haraway

The work done by both Haraway and Harding prompted the move away from Cartesian claims of viewing from nowhere. Rather than concern for a 'value-free' objective approach to research, Haraway was famously attentive to accountability and situatedness:

“Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges”

(Haraway, 1991)

Inclusion of a researcher's worldview or biography does not necessarily contaminate a path to knowledge, and as mentioned already, an inclusive approach is part of my research process. Situatedness is of critical value in the examination of a non-native culture. 'Situated knowledges' invite the researcher to reflect on where their morals and beliefs stem from throughout the data analysis process. Moreover, it encourages the breaking of hierarchies during the research process, and in the case of a Western woman interviewing a Nonwestern woman this is fundamental, since history has cultivated an innate inequality. Through Haraway's emphasis on the importance of including personal experiences as a researcher it provides part of the needed response to superseding the insider/outsider feminist dispute. This is done through avoiding the pretence of an objective view-point, and rather immersing my personal consciousness deeply within my research so that I can show how my background has shaped the outcomes.

Situated Away from 'The Real'

Instead of a general claim to truth, I would argue like Haraway that there are inescapable multiplicities of partial knowledges, conflicts, and contradictions. Certeau's methodology is dedicated to “encouraging heterogeneity and allowing alterity to proliferate” (Highmore, 2007, p. 16). This inspires a critical epistemology circumventive of rigidness to the 'real'. Highmore links Certeau's work with Haraway's 'situated knowledges'. He emphasises Certeau's belief that there is no privileged access to the real, be it through contemporary

ethnography or historical work and that “there is no choice but to work in a world of partial views” (Highmore, 2007, p.16). To avoid the pitfalls of critique where ‘knowledge’ becomes general indifference and everything is equally untrue Certeau would encourage researchers to be ‘responsive and responsible’ to epistemological doubt (Highmore, 2007, p. 17). This is in line with Haraway’s call to engage “partial, locatable, critical knowledges” and to be responsible (1991, p. 191). As a feminist researcher I find these calls for situatedness imperative: they help to work through my position as a non-native and to account for the inevitable research flaws of being an outsider, such as information being lost in translation both linguistically and culturally. The calls for situatedness also discourage an elitist and orientalist view of ‘them over there’, because I engage *with* my participants, calling on their personal experience rather than regurgitating information that has been produced through Western literature and media. Moreover an approach that welcomes alterity is void of attempting to portray all-knowing facts. Certeau thrives in the unmanageability of the cultural world. Examining culture means to examine something that cannot be ordered in a unified direction. Acknowledging the presence of a ‘heteroglossia’ of conflicting voices in the social world strengthens research; it does not seek to encompass culture in its entirety but it accounts for partiality and the temporality of culture.

## Conclusion

With its roots stemming from a much-needed critique of universalism, standpoint theory is definitive of feminist research practices. This alternative method of doing science has created capacity for women’s voices and experiences to be included in the traditionally exclusionary sciences. The assertion that standpoint theory makes, that the oppressed have the best view on society and their own group, has been quite controversial. The shift towards viewing the world from the eyes and experiences of the oppressed was ground-breaking, however it has potential to essentialize. Donna Haraway’s ‘situated knowledges’ has been powerful in addressing the pitfalls of standpoint theory. Building on the crucial work carried out by Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith, Haraway calls for the ridding of so-called ‘neutral’ objectivity. This move towards the recognition of partial and locatable knowledge is influential in my ethical viewpoint as a researcher. This study aims to encompass both standpoint theory and situated knowledges by calling for the experiences of those whose voices are structurally excluded from the discourse. Furthermore I will maintain

responsibility and accountability for what I produce through reflecting on my position as a non-native, this position which means I can only interpret information but never speak for those whom I write about.

## Intersectionality

### Introduction

Aside from being disparaged for essentializing the ability of the oppressed to have ‘the best view’, standpoint theory has also been criticized for implying sameness across a group or category of subordinated people. A valuable epistemic device all the same, it loses credibility if it does not address exactly *whose* lives experiences are being included. The theory of intersectionality assists in accounting for the structural power-dynamics that exist between and among different “groups”. Here I will outline the emergence of the theory and how it is vital in a study that examines women who lack citizenship.

### Multiplicities of Identity

Intersectionality was a term coined by law professor Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989 to address the single-axis framework being utilized in antidiscrimination law and throughout feminist scholarship (Bracke & Bellacasa, 2007). The theory looks at how factors such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and nation mutually construct one another rather than examining them as separate systems of oppression. It considers multiple modes of oppression and is crucial in highlighting the power-differences between different categories of women or other subordinated groups. Patricia Hill Collins wants to expand the potential of oppression from “the primacy of gender, but within constructs of multiplicity residing in social structures themselves” (1997, p. 377). The inclusion of social structures is necessary in identifying the different levels by which groups experience levels of discrimination and in the case of this study can help to identify different experiences felt by stateless women.

Not only is intersectionality advantageous for recognizing power dynamics and over-lapping modes of oppression throughout different groups but it is imperative for permitting identities their fluidity. Gloria Wekker, another prominent scholar in the field of intersectionality,

believes in the potential of intersectionality to transcend identities that have been reduced dialectically:

“Instead, a new, postmodern concept of identity is advanced, one that is always in flux, open, fragmentary, in process”

(2009, p. 65).

In a study comprising people defined by their citizenship status this fluctuating process of identity-shaping bears immense relevance, as people’s citizenship status can change. Stateless people living in Thailand are constantly subject to changes in the law for acquisition of a bureaucratically-assigned citizenship status. Therefore it is extremely interesting to see how an identity-shift through a change in citizenship status would impact on other areas of one’s life.

#### The Intersection of Citizenship and Age

In this study the theory of intersectionality is applicable to modes of gender, age and citizenship status. Data collected through the Thailand Project is comprised of information about stateless men and women, and about men and women with citizenship, across an age range of eighteen years old to the mid-eighties. Intersectionality theory will help to examine the experiences of privilege and/or discrimination felt by these different demographics. Collins’s example of intersections between gender and age are of significant relevance to the data analysis methodology of this study. As was explained earlier, female autonomy in Thailand is concomitant with marriage and increased age. Women in Thailand experience relatively more autonomy compared to other Asian countries but that autonomy is only based on whether they are older and/or married.

An excellent synopsis of the interworking of intersectionality is provided by Hill Collins in her explanation of how race and gender do not operate mutually exclusive of one another:

“Whereas White men and White women enjoy shared racial privileges provided by Whiteness, within the racial boundary of Whiteness women are expected to defer to men. People of colour have not been immune from this same logic. Within the frame of race as family, women of subordinated racial groups defer to men of their groups, often to support men’s struggles in dealing with racism”

(Hill Collins, 2000, p.159).

This example motivates the idea of replacing the focus on skin colour by a focus on citizenship status. In this study it leads to a comparison of the privileges enjoyed by men and women who have citizenship, with those of stateless men and women. But within those different groups, citizens and stateless, I will examine whether or not there is a boundary that upholds subordinate expectations of women. Moreover, the theory of intersectionality will aid the analysis of data in cases where stateless men appear to experience higher levels of discrimination than women with citizenship. Theoretically, stateless women will be at a very interesting juncture as they are subject to two powerful modes of oppression/discrimination: statelessness and gender. How these two modes of identification intersect will be interesting to look at because it can show how gender influences lives differently depending on one's citizenship status.

## Conclusion

Intersectionality's response to the drawbacks of standpoint theory creates a space of wider inclusion for this study. It is not beneficial to this study to represent the examined group of stateless women as homogenous singular identities. Representing the arenas that are intersecting will help gauge how their heterogeneous state needs addressing. The theory of intersectionality also provides the capacity to account for men in the dataset. Investigating how statelessness works differently for men is an important consideration during the development of the intervention strategy as this strategy has been planned to address the needs of stateless women. Such an examination of multiple factors will shine a light on the ways in which citizenship status and gender amalgamate and fluctuate as overriding forces of subordination on people in northern Thailand.





CHAPTER FIVE

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# METHODOLOGY

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## The Thailand Project

The Statelessness Programme initiated The Thailand Project towards the end of 2012. The aim of TTP is to assess the impact of statelessness on women in Thailand, focusing on how it impacts on women's sense of legal empowerment and whether or not statelessness increases susceptibility to human trafficking. The goal of the research is to develop and pilot an intervention strategy that will address these impacts. The idea is that an intervention strategy that can increase levels of subjective legal empowerment will lower the vulnerability towards exploitation and thus enhance counter-human trafficking work.

Data for TTP has been collected through a three method approach, and includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. The first step was to carry out interviews with key informants on the ground in Thailand. Information gathered from those interviews was used to reshape parts of the questionnaire, also to collect information on causes of human trafficking and the consequences of being stateless according to experts in the field. The second methodology was a cross-sectional survey. Four hundred and eighty-nine surveys were carried out. The three communities in northern Thailand where the surveys were conducted were chosen after consultations with on-the-ground informants. The surveys were designed to measure levels of subjective legal empowerment, which is the perceived belief of a person in their ability to cope with a problem. With permission from the Statelessness Programme I will analyse a sub-section of data collected for The Thailand Project through the questionnaires and key informant interviews. The third and final methodology planned by TTP are in-depth interviews with women who had previously been trafficked. The objective of these interviews is to get a deeper understanding of the human trafficking *modus operandi*. The data from these in-depth interviews will not be analysed for my research because the questions do not pertain to Thai culture or even to broader experiences of women in Thai society.

## Mixed Method Approach

The survey carried out under the Statelessness Programme's Thailand Project did not explicitly aim to capture the relationship between Thai culture and women. In fact, culture as a factor affecting women's vulnerability to human trafficking was not something the team had considered until they were on the ground in Thailand garnering information through key

informant interviews. As a result, follow-up research had to be conducted by myself in order to gather more detailed information on cultural relations in Thailand.

Hesse-Bieber and Leavy (2007) acknowledge the benefits of a mixed method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research to fill the gaps where either methodology may miss. Although there were several questions in The Thailand Project study pertaining to culture, or at least interpretable as such, the surveys could not capture the issues I wanted to understand at a more profound level. Furthermore Hesse-Bieber and Leavy (2007) explain the benefit of qualitative research for not reducing the actions and behaviours of women into categories. At the same time, interviews alone would not suffice for encapsulating the relationships between statelessness, human trafficking, culture and gender. Hesse-Bieber and Leavy state that the benefit of using quantitative methods is that they are particularly well suited to look at “‘cause and effect’ relationships between a set of factors that are referred to as variables” (2007, p. 250). The survey carried out under TTP aimed to produce a picture of the causes of human trafficking but the semi-structured interviews I conducted via Skype aimed to disclose a deeper understanding of these causes, and their relationship with culture, as expressed by the target group. The qualitative interviews were carried out with a target-group different from the qualitative-survey group. The result is a discussion in which one group modifies the evidence of the other, with benefits to the overall conclusions. I consider the qualitative study to be the principal method of inquiry and the quantitative to be secondary, but when the samples are separated, as here, into disjoint sets, the results can be more interesting and probably more reliable due to the moderating effect of the cross-reference method.

I have created four classifications as the primary issues for analysis within this study: Intersections in the Position of Women, The “Old” Culture of ‘Bun Khun’, The “New” Culture of Modernity, and Discourses of Difference – Modernity and Tradition. These classifications will form the shape of the Data Analysis Chapter. The material collected through the key informant interviews, the interviews I carried out and the survey data, have been categorized under these four headings. The data findings will include both quotes by interviewees and quantitative data findings. The quantitative data is presented in pie chart formation, each segment is colour-coded with reference to the survey question and answers. Quotes from TTP key informant interviews must be presented as anonymous. There were ten TTP “key informants” (KI) interviewed in Thailand. I have numbered each interviewee from one to ten and they are coded as KI-1, KI-2, KI-3 etc. The work by scholars, anthropologists

and academics, as outlined in the Context Chapter on cultures and customs in Thailand will also be referred to within these sections.

## Dataset Analysis

Despite feminist concern for quantitative research methods such work and findings can be an opportunity for placing misogyny or other social justice concerns within the mainstream discourse, such as public policy. Kathi Miner-Rubino explains that as a feminist “whether we like it or not, people respond to quantitative data” (quoted in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). Quantitative data has, for many years, been influential in highlighting the needs, and ameliorating the position, of marginalised or disadvantaged groups. The survey questions that have been selected as pertinent for this study provide a broader picture of the current climate for stateless people in Thailand. The 489 surveys conducted are something which would have been beyond my capacity as an individual researcher and are therefore of immense benefit to my study.

Out of the total sixty-five questions given to the sample group by TTP, thirty-five were non-demographic related questions. From that set of non-demographic related questions I have selected six for analysis for this study on culture. There was demographic data collected which will enable me to analyse differences among the participants in age, gender and socio-economic status. 248 respondents of the total survey sample identified themselves as being stateless and the remaining 241 have Thai citizenship; all were over the age of eighteen. Between the two groups (stateless and citizens) there were a practically equal number of men and women, and the age demographics were divided equally over ten year age gaps from eighteen to eighty-four years old. SPSS was the principal tool used in analysis of the survey data. The results will be predominantly presented via pie-charts and with percentile comparisons. As the survey sample is quite large the presentation of coloured pie charts aims to make the results visually accessible and easily comparable.

## Interviews

Describing cultures is inherently concerned with how we view the relationship between people and society, how we interact with structures and institutions of power, and whether or not there is agency within these constructivist societies. It is not sufficient to say ‘they are victims of their culture’, rather it is necessary to understand the dominant forces, be they stable or fluctuating, affecting life choices and everyday practices. An investigation that looks into a non-native culture cries out for the use of a standpoint epistemology throughout the methodological approach. Ethically-speaking there may not be a ‘pure’ path to follow in ethnology, but engaging with speech is a tactic for insinuating the other in the process of writing.

I have aimed to investigate how young women living in northern Thailand feel about gender roles in Thailand today. Questions have been framed on the basis of the commonly regarded opinion that daughters bear the highest responsibility for financially supporting the family (Suksomboon, 2008; Mills, 1997). In Harding’s “Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives” she explains that “women’s different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research” (1991, p. 121). Women’s voices have been the starting point of this research.

I have gathered my first-hand material through three Skype interviews with girls in their early twenties, who are living or have lived in Northern Thailand. On the social networking site “Facebook” I am connected with acquaintances from my time spent in Northern Thailand. I had originally contacted ten people known to me through Facebook and asked them would they mind being interviewed by me on Skype – about ‘bun khun’ in particular. Many of the young women declined because they did not have access to Skype. Nevertheless I managed to conduct three interviews, ranging from one to two hours, with P’Aor, P’Latda and P’Khai<sup>5</sup>, all of whom are in their early twenties.

P’Latda is originally from Laos and has lived in Thailand for over five years, working at DEPDC/GMS<sup>6</sup>. She has spent a significant portion of her life in Thailand, speaking the language and engaging with the people, the social issues and the culture. I deemed P’Latda to

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<sup>5</sup> In Thailand P’ is a polite informal prefix used when addressing someone a little older than the speaker, or simply someone the speaker shows respect towards.

<sup>6</sup> DEPDC/GMS is the abbreviation for Development Education Centre for Daughters and Communities in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. It is a human trafficking prevention organisation based in the most northern point of Thailand, and the organisation where I spent six months interning in 2011.

be a suitable informant for this study. P'Khai was born in Thailand, has Thai citizenship and has lived in the northern part of the country all her life. She was moved into the shelter at DEPDC/GMS at a young age due to circumstances in her family home. P'Aor has been a central figure in this methodological approach. P'Aor was born in Thailand, but because her parents fled from Myanmar decades ago she was born into statelessness. Identified by a social worker as being highly vulnerable to human trafficking, she moved into the shelter at DEPDC/GMS. In 2008, with the help of an NGO also entitled The Thailand Project, P'Aor began steps towards gaining Thai citizenship. During the subsequent years P'Aor was the recipient of a scholarship from the NGO which allowed her to travel to study on a Bachelor programme in the United States. In 2011, P'Aor was granted Thai citizenship and continues to study in the U.S. today with the intent of moving back to Thailand to work next year. Her experience as both a stateless person and a Thai citizen makes P'Aor a well-informed participant. Furthermore her familiarity with U.S. culture is an intriguing addition that has undoubtedly influenced her perspectives of both tradition and modernity. The fact that the participants are not all simply stateless women based in northern Thailand brings a diversity of perspectives to this study on the effects of culture and will illuminate the heteroglossia of conflicting voices and views thriving in any society.

Skype is not an ideal environment for conducting an in-depth interview, at times there were minor issues with sound and image clarity. However one of the major advantages of this type of medium is that there is software available to record the conversations in video format. This was been extremely useful in transcribing and in revisiting the interviews to examine body language and facial gestures in a way that an audio transcript could never capture. Despite issues with unreliable technology it is an efficient means of conducting international research when time and money are limited. All participants were made aware that I would be recording the conversation and I was given permission to use the information for this study. The information collected from these interviews is analysed according to the four classification I have created and outlined towards the beginning of this chapter.

I did not want the questions to come across as a negative attack on Thai culture. My discomfort may have inhibited me from asking more invasive or confrontational questions. I was also aware of the Thai social mores of not engaging in confrontation, but of “saving face” i.e. not speaking badly of something or someone. Having borne this in mind whilst framing questions, the questions may not always have been very direct. However the advantage of both being familiar to the interviewees and not being particularly direct was that

the interviews were quite fluid and the participants were at ease in the setting. The semi-structured interviews were complimented by pleasant conversational flow.



CHAPTER FIVE

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# DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

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## Introduction

The cultural expectation of ‘bun khun’ was flagged by The Thailand Project’s key informants as a catalyst for vulnerabilities for young women in Thailand, and even more so for stateless women. Amidst many of the quotes relating to the filial obligation expected of young women, KI-1 summarises ‘bun khun’ in great detail:<sup>7</sup>

“In Thai society girls are held responsible for the duration of their life for the wellbeing and financial status of their families. The cultural bit is very important to understand here. Until you can equalise that or distribute that you have got girls all over this nation thinking they have to do whatever they can to provide good karmic duty to their family, as an obligation and as part of the real family structure here. That’s culture, how do you change that? It’s this kind of mentality... it’s still unequal here between the genders. Women aren’t valued and if they are not valued and hold the responsibility for the family, but aren’t given the means or opportunity to do that in a lucrative way, what are they going to do? You don’t have an education but you have a gigantic moral familial religious obligation to do so, to take care of your mother and father because that is your life duty and good karma, for your next life.”

While the above is a quotation by a ‘key informant’, what was missing from The Thailand Project data was the voices of the young women themselves. This chapter includes the opinions of P’Aor, P’Khai and P’Latda on topics of family obligation, migration and modernity. The sentiments expressed by TTP key informants will also be shared here, regarding their opinions on how ‘bun khun’ can cause vulnerabilities for women in Thailand. Alongside those opinions, quantitative data results from TTP survey questions will be presented through pie-charts. These various forms of data have been used to examine women’s position in Thai society, the cultural expectations of women in Thailand and how they feel towards traditional customs, particularly ‘bun khun’.

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<sup>7</sup> For meaning of KI-1 etc. see the Methodology chapter, page 32.

## Intersections in the Position of Women

### Introduction

The theory of intersectionality is used here to view the different experiences of men and women in Thai society, specifically their financial vulnerabilities and their quality of life. For a study that aims to investigate the relationship between culture and stateless women the theory of intersectionality helps my analysis of the multidimensional dynamics of such a relationship, one that can be affected differently across age-range, citizenship status and gender. Intersectionality theory is utilised in this section to measure oppressions that accumulate for individuals i.e. a stateless woman is affected by two modes of oppression. Furthermore, the theory of intersectionality reveals how being subject to a specific mode of oppression can make people in unrelated groups share equal experiences of subordination; stateless men and women with citizenship share similar experiences of oppression. Presenting the intersectional component of the quantitative data results will allow TTP to consider how to address such cross-sectional issues. The major part of this section is uses quantitative data from TTP survey results. The survey covered a large sample group (489 people in total) with a range of differing demographics. Varying demographics, such as age and income, highlight how different modes of identification can intersect and affect one's life. Furthermore the results from the survey questions are also compared against the qualitative interview results and the literature on the woman's role in Thailand, as presented in the Context chapter. The discussion that follows outlines views on the position of women in Thailand. Discussions on how this position is influenced by intersectional modes of oppression will follow.

### Domestic Equality?

P'Latda has noted a shift in attitudes and behaviours between the genders. She voices this aspect of gender equality with grave concern:

“I think it's dangerous for girls and boys now. When girls go outside, their parents don't see what they do, they go with friends or another person and parents don't

know. So very dangerous now. Girls have freedom to go wherever they want, yes girls can go wherever they want. New culture *na*".<sup>8</sup>

P'Latda acknowledges this was not always the situation for girls in Thai society through her use of the phrase "new culture". Emergence of the shift of women moving out of domesticated roles is not a clear indicator that female autonomy in Thailand has come to fruition. For Western thinkers it may appear that occupation of the streets is a step towards gender equality for women. Patricia Hill-Collins has noted on the gendered nature of the street:

"Women are expected to remain in their home place. Avoiding the dangerous space of public streets allows women to care for children, the sick, and the elderly, and other dependent family members"

(Collins, 2000, p. 161).

In contrast to Western scholarship, P'Latda's standpoint is of concern for the new street-presence of young women. P'Latda has linked it to the acquisition of a 'new culture' and so sees women's street occupation happening in conjunction with the loss of old traditions and customs. The loss of an 'old culture' could be reflected in Thailand's 'transitional economy' status. As the economy grows, women and men enter the streets, endeavouring to find a better quality of life and seizing new employment opportunities. Modernisation ensues, labour migration rises, consumerism increases and less and less people remain in the home or rural setting to preserve cultural values and acts. Women's movement away from a life of domestic dedication is an expression of agency, but it does not have to be interpreted as resistant to an 'old culture' (Mahmood, 2005). P'Latda's comment that "Girls... [can] go wherever they want... New culture *na*?" can be interpreted as meaning that a subordinate position of women as carers is disappearing. However, the idea that such a position is subordinate stems from my background and experience as a Western woman. Dedicated to studying and building a career, I interpret a domesticated position as a limitation, one that will be avoided until I so choose. The meanings of female emancipation, agency and resistance against harmful cultures is personal and circumstance-specific. With respect to the standpoint of P'Latda, her concern for how dangerous it is now for women, needs to be considered during the development of the intervention strategy. An intervention strategy

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<sup>8</sup> "*na*" is an ending particle in Thai Language, usually to prompt the other person to respond. An English equivalent of such a term would be "you know" or "OK?"

could incorporate the potential dangers of the street and strangers, and also dialogue on the loss of Thai culture.

### Financial Equality?

Further investigation into the position of women in Thailand can be carried out through examining men's and women's financial well-being. Do women in Thailand experience economic independence, and furthermore, is one's financial situation affected by one's citizenship status? The set of pie charts in figure 3 below were used to look at the intersectionality of gender and citizenship status as modes of oppression. The question from the survey asked:

‘Imagine if a family member is seriously ill and needs expensive treatment, how easily can you find the money?’

Four pie charts were created to present the answers of the entire sample group and are displayed below in Figure 1. The two charts on the left are answers by the citizens: female above, male below. The charts on the right are the answers by stateless people: female above male again.

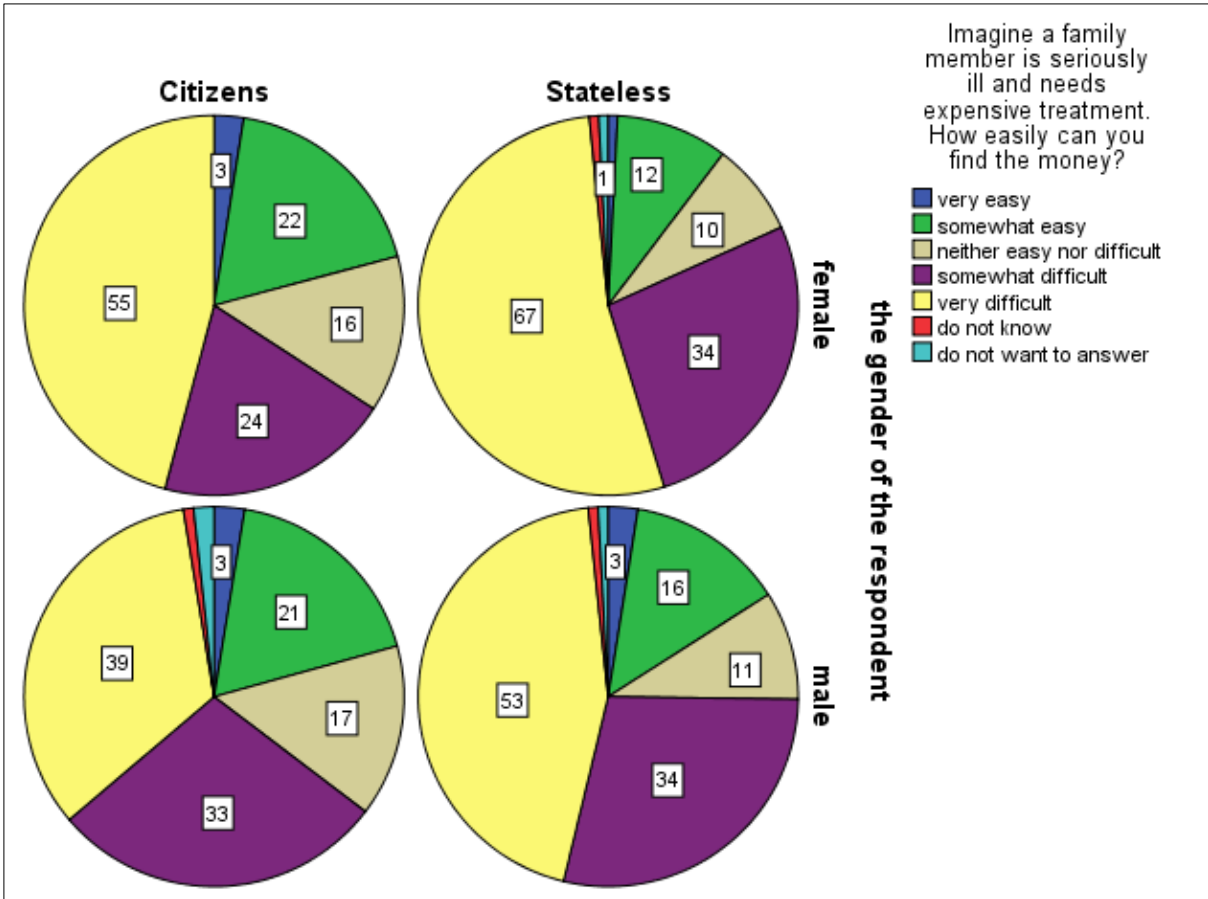


Figure 1

There are several ways to assess the outcome of this question. As the answers for “very easy” are minute I have chosen to compare “somewhat easy” and “very difficult” (the blue and white regions) between all four groups. The numbers shown on the pie charts are the total number of people in each group who have chosen each answer. I have converted these to percentages for the following comparative analysis.

Roughly 18% of both men and women with citizenship say it would be “somewhat easy” to find money in an emergency situation. 14% of stateless men say the same, whilst only 9% of stateless women believe it would be “somewhat easy” for them to find the money. What this shows is that in such a situation, citizenship status is a stronger determinant than gender, as stateless men are potentially worse off than women with citizenship. These results also show that the most disenfranchised group in the survey sample are stateless women because these women are subject to two axis of identity that determine a subordinate position for them in society. It is significant that the results do not indicate a culture where only women are

subject to marginalized well-being. Depending on one's citizenship, status can determine the quality of life for both men and women in Thailand.

Unsurprisingly men with citizenship find it the least difficult to acquire money in an emergency: 33% said it would be "very difficult", while 45% of both stateless men and women with citizenship have reported that it would be "very difficult". These two groups are subject to one of the two modes of oppression: gender and citizenship status. Stateless women, by contrast deal with two oppressive systems and 51% of them would find it "very difficult". Once again, they are the group most vulnerable.

### The Influences of Citizenship Status and Age

Some of the questions were concerned with how life experiences are affected across gender axis and also through citizenship status. Here I am excluding men and specifically looking at the position of women in Thai society depending on their citizenship status. How do different women experience fulfillment of life and what mode of identification causes women to experience fulfillment or lack of it? The charts in Figure 2 have been differentiated by stateless women and women with citizenship and show the results for the question: How satisfied are you with your life?

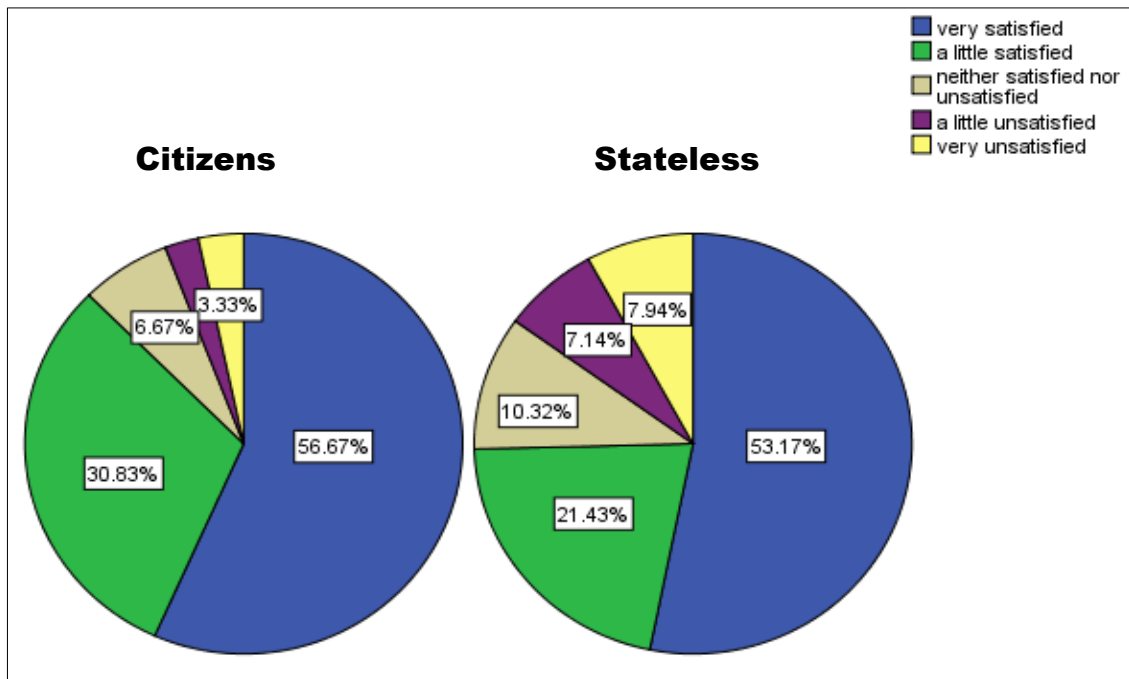


Figure 2

There doesn't appear to be a major difference on levels of life satisfaction between stateless women and women with citizenship. The overwhelming majority of both groups state that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with their lives. There are twice as many stateless women "very unsatisfied" compared to women with citizenship, but it is a very small percentage of the total group. This is a surprising result when the restrictive conditions that stateless people are forced to live by is factored in. However when we break these figures down into age categories stark differences emerge between stateless women and women with citizenship – as will be seen in Figure 3 on the following page, where the women's answers are sub-divided by citizenship, status and age. The age groups are ascending from the top pie chart downwards, starting with ages 18-25 years and ending at >65:

Age categories

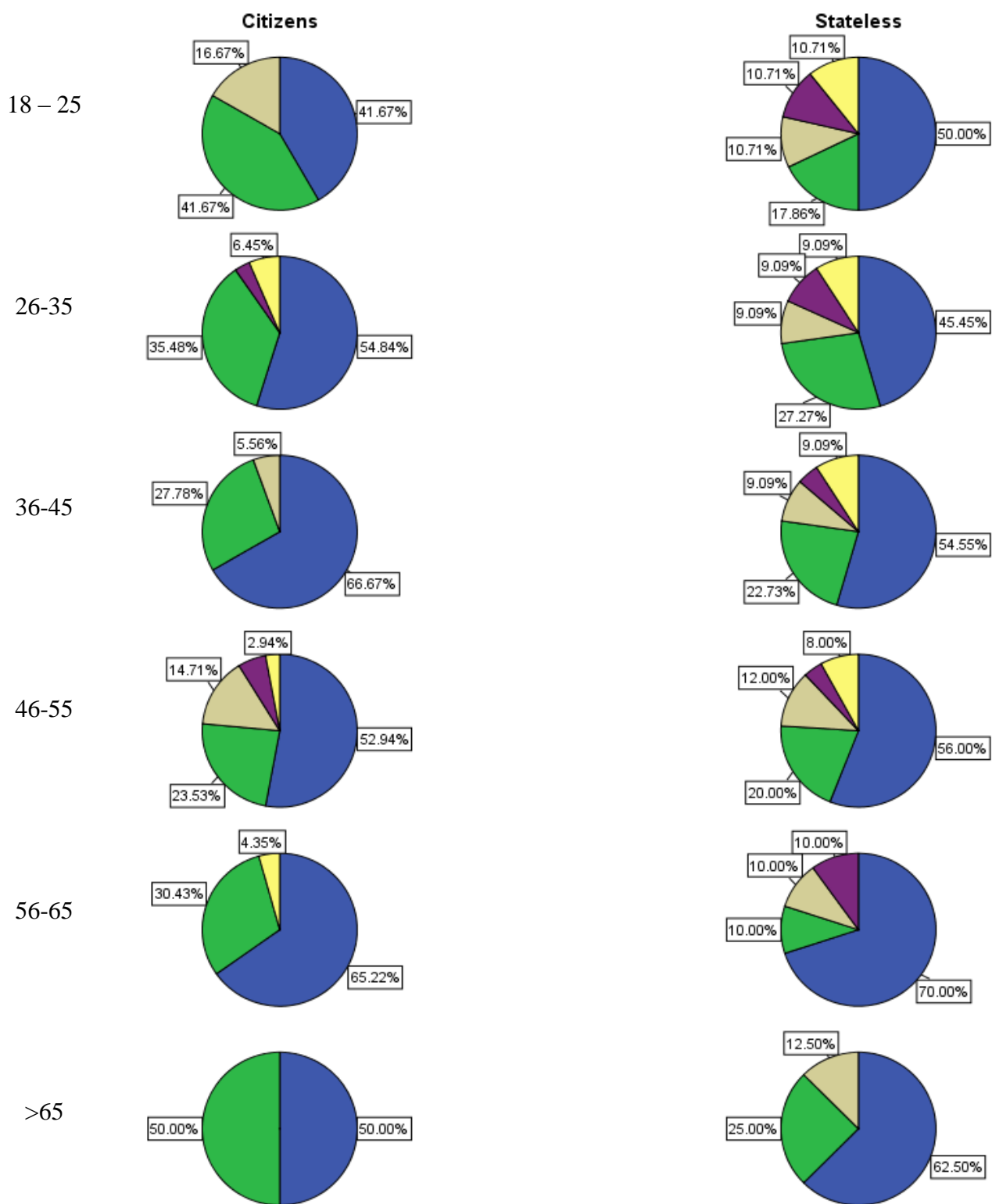
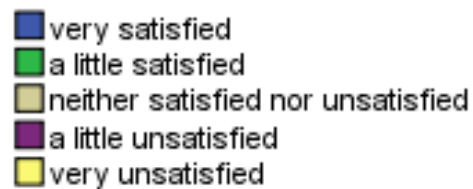


Figure 3



These results show that age is clearly a factor influencing levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Percentages of women feeling “very satisfied” are up to 20% higher for women aged above 56 years compared with those aged between 18 and 25 years. A significant feature of the breakdown is that “a little unsatisfied” and “very unsatisfied” account for between 10% and 20% of the answers for *stateless* women between the ages of 18 and 55 years old.

The charts highlight the importance that an axis such as age can have on women’s lives. It was noted earlier that Mary-Beth Mills claimed the level of autonomy experienced by women in Thailand is concomitant with increased age. The age-breakdown also shows that there is in fact a significant difference between stateless women and women with citizenship on how satisfied they feel with their lives. Satisfaction increases with age for both, though more so for those with citizenship, presumably because their position, or at least their sense of security, increases with age also. In fact over the age of 65, dissatisfaction is entirely absent from those with citizenship. Reflecting on this astonishing deficit of dissatisfaction I wonder how common such an answer would be across a much wider sample group. Nevertheless it is a significant reflection of how older age and attainment of citizenship positively influences women’s quality of life in northern Thailand. In both groups the very young show most evidence of dissatisfaction. Younger stateless women are much more dissatisfied with their lives, compared with both older stateless women, and women with citizenship. On the basis of these figures a recommendation should be made for TTP to develop an intervention strategy to take into account the difference experiences of women according to their age. The Thailand Project should also investigate the data further to see whether age-related increases in satisfaction can be directly correlated with other age-related changes in a person’s status – such as financial improvement, employment security and domestic stability.

## Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative results in this section do not prove that there is strong inequality between genders in Thailand. Intersectional theory has instead shown a relation across genders, men and women’s experiences converge and diverge in similarities because of their different ages and citizenship status. It seems that being part of a minority group is more beneficial or harmful to one’s standard of living than gender is. Stateless men appear to be more vulnerable in certain situations than women with citizenship. These results do not

exactly speak to what Rojanaphruk has recently referred to as “a culture of male domination” (2013), but rather to a culture dominated by those with citizenship.

Nonetheless, stateless men, and women with citizenship, seem to struggle less in financial situations compared to stateless women. This shows that the dual axis of identity that can operate negatively on the lives of people in Thailand. The theory of intersectionality has shown that within the two groups (citizens and stateless) there is a boundary that determines a subordinate position for women. Women with citizenship are not on equal par with men with citizenship. And stateless women also do not enjoy the same standards of living as stateless men. Yet through the acquisition of citizenship women have the capacity to surpass the position of stateless men in Thai society. While this analysis points to the ways in which the position of women in Thailand is complicated by factors such as age and citizenship status, a more elaborate investigation is needed to examine the wider implications of their position. The conclusion that can be drawn from the results so far is that TTP intervention strategy needs to be cognisant of stateless men’s subjugated position and that culture alone does not define women’s roles or capacities in Thailand.

## The “Old” Culture of ‘Bun Khun’

After the initial interview took place with P’Latda, doubt began to arise over whether or not practicing ‘bun khun’ was still common. She first described a “new culture” and then said how it is not the same as the past and that so much of the old culture is lost already. Strong sentiments such as these required further investigation before proceeding with a research project that aimed to investigate harmful traditional practises. I found that both P’Aor and P’Khai believe that ‘bun khun’ is actually the most important thing in their culture today. The discourse around loss of culture will be returned to in the next section. But first it is interesting to look at the responses of other Thai girls to P’Latda’s belief that the “old culture” is being lost because more young people migrate for a better livelihood. P’Latda stated: “If boys and girls go to big cities [they] forget about their parents.” As discussed earlier, labour migration may be an execution of agency but it is not necessarily an act of resistance to cultures and traditions as P’Latda implies. P’Khai, who migrated from the most northern point of Thailand to Chiang Mai, the largest city in northern Thailand, does not share this sentiment about a lost custom:

“I don’t forget about them [her parents], yes I live in the city and I think about them, I visit them, I miss them. I care for them because I am not there with them... I actually feel closer to them... I think about them even more.”

As Certeau would observe this is a heteroglossia of contrasting and conflicting voices, stereotypical of everyday life. What this also means is that antagonistic forces can reside amongst groups or communities. What do these local tensions say about different people’s attitudes toward Thai culture, and has the differing backgrounds of my interviewees shaped their contrasting views? Someone can interpret the actions of another person as resistant, while the person themselves are what Mahmood would describe as a “docile agent” (2005).

According to two of my three interviewees ‘bun khun’ is still central component of Thai culture. With that in mind I investigated what five of the ten TTP key informants had emphasised as prominent and harmful: women bear the greatest filial obligation to their parents. Neither P’Khai nor P’Latda would categorize ‘bun khun’ as being significantly pressurizing on any particular demographic. P’Latda always mentioned both boys and girls when discussing ‘bun khun’. P’Khai said “I think it[bun khun] is very important for every

Thai person today, not only for young people.” She does not agree that women bear the greater responsibility within the home:

“Most of the time I think family expects sons to be the head and to help more but right now I think it’s everybody who can do it.”

P’Khai has linked such expectation to the increased availability of education in Thailand. The family member with the best education and career is expected to head the household:

“I have a friend named Mee, right now she does all the work and is the head of the family and taking care of everybody... she has the highest education in the family, and she can work and earn money for the family...I think it can depend on education.”

P’Aor described the different specific roles in families. She observed that there is a greater expectation placed on women but that expectation only arises for women who show greater respect to their parents: “I think women respect parents more than guys, and listen to parents more than guys do. Then it is both ways, parents expect more from women yes.” From all three interviewees it is apparent that there are additional factors influencing who bears the greatest filial obligation. If one child has a greater education, or if another child has greater respect for their parents then expectations are increased. I set out to investigate the ways in which cultural expectations increase vulnerabilities for stateless women. But from these interviews it is evident that there isn’t a strictly female-dependent phenomenon. The opinions of P’Khai, P’Latda and P’Aor also smash an age-old imperial view that non-Western women need rescuing from their backward and barbaric culture.

The notion of filial obligations is not exclusively Thai. Patricia Hill-Collins points out that

“In a situation in which notions of belonging to a family remain important to issues of responsibility and accountability, individuals feel that they ‘owe’ something to, and are responsible for, members of their families”

(2000, p. 165).

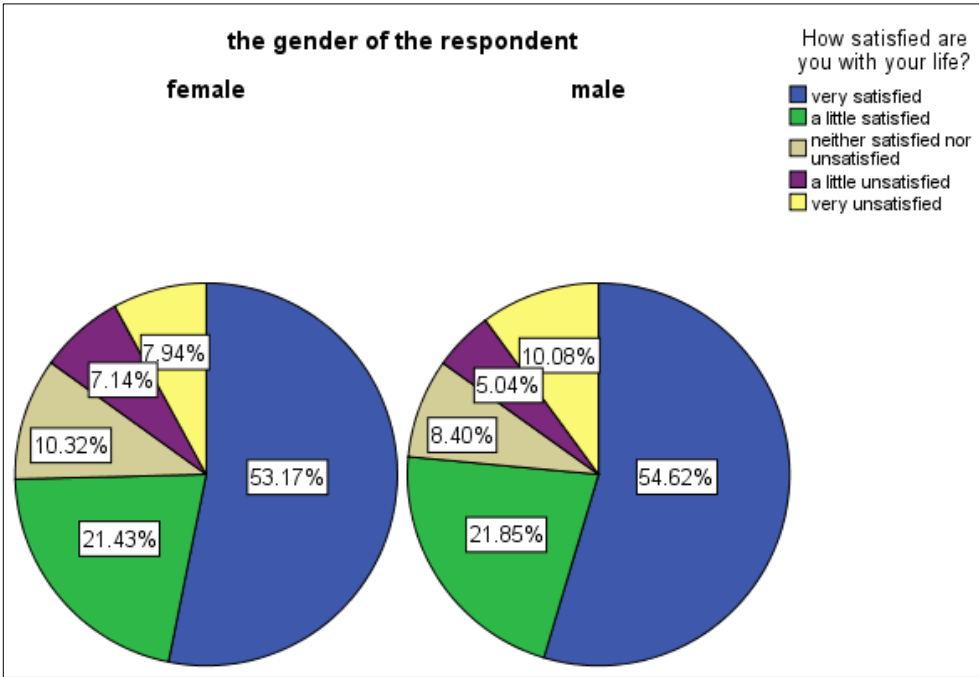
Collins stresses that it is the notion of ‘belonging’ that gives family members entitlements, and declares that “men’s duties lie in providing financial support”. That is where TTP key informants suggest that the Thai case branches off from the norm. The hypothesis put forward by TTP key informants is that women in Thailand feel greater pressure to provide for their family and thus will seek whatever means necessary to migrate to bigger cities and enter

the channels of labour. KI-9 stated “it’s also really important to help your parents, be a good daughter”, while KI-5 used terms such as “familial duty” and “family responsibilities”. TTP informants’ particular concern is for stateless women, KI-6 said that:

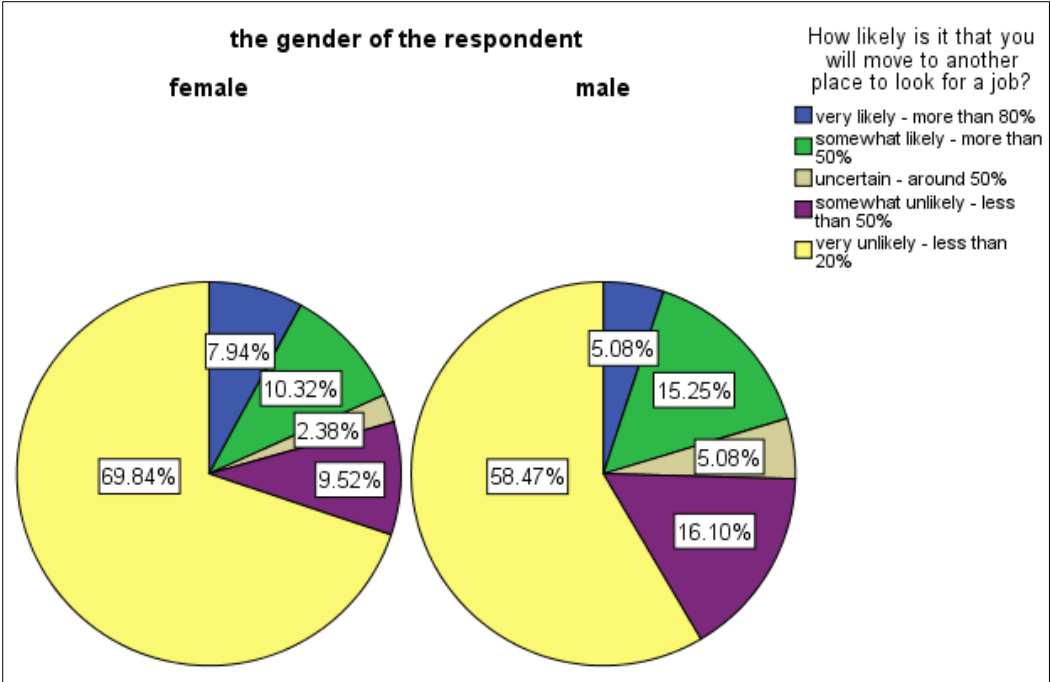
“They feel the pressure from their family, the more pressure that they feel, the more they are going to go [migrate] out of desperation”.

Stateless people’s travel and employment rights are legally restricted, and according to TTP key informants they will seek whatever means necessary to gain employment, out of desperation and to fulfil their filial obligations. In light of this, there is the belief that stateless women’s desire to migrate increases their likelihood of encountering or seeking unreliable travel/employment agents and thus becoming trapped in a human trafficking situation. In terms of the legislative restrictions on stateless people, it should also mean that stateless men are susceptible to human trafficking: unable to travel or gain employment legally should they not also seek out informal routes to employment? According to TTP informants it is the stateless women who are at a higher risk due to the “gigantic moral familial religious obligation” placed on them by cultural expectations.

In this context three questions from the quantitative survey results were used to investigate a difference between stateless men and women on pressures they feel to improve their livelihood. As the concern is for stateless people in particular I have excluded answers by men and women with citizenship. The questions, which refer to desire to migrate and feelings of satisfaction, and their differentiated responses are illustrated in the following three diagrams, Figures 4, 5 and 6:



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*

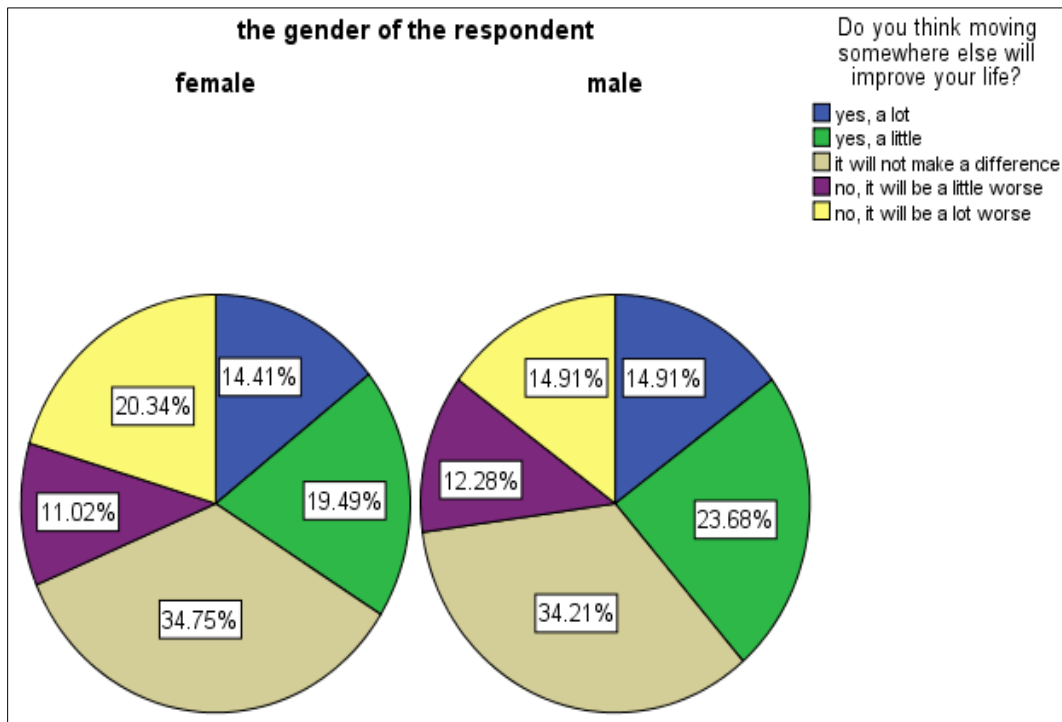


Figure 6

Neither Figure 4, 5 or 6 demonstrate a significant difference between stateless men and women in regard to their desire to migrate, the level of satisfaction they feel about their lives or even in regard to the idea that moving away would improve their lives.. The majority of both stateless men and women think that moving away will make their lives “a lot worse”. An overwhelming majority of both stateless men and women think it is “very unlikely” that they will move to another place to look for a job. As was shown earlier around 75% of stateless women are satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, this is displayed here again to show the number of stateless men satisfied or very satisfied with their lives is almost identical.

#### Changing the Language Changes the Conversation

‘Bun khun’ was chosen as the main Thai custom for investigation as a response to TTP key informants deeming it harmful to women. The quantitative data does not suggest that there is a stronger cultural influence or pressure on women to provide for the family. The interview results also challenge the proposals made by TTP key informants that ‘bun khun’ is oppressive by nature and that it is a specifically female phenomenon. During the interviews

that I conducted with P'Khai, P'Latda and P'Aor I noticed all three participants used the word “kindness” to translate ‘bun khun’. There is a significant difference in language between TTP informants and the young women of northern Thailand. TTP informants explicitly referred to the meaning of ‘bun khun’ as “obligation”. Use of the word “obligation” has negative associations, implying that it is something people are compelled to do and synonymous with words like “forced”. Translating a traditional custom into a word like “kindness” does not evoke concern for harmful implications. What this means for a study investigating harmful cultures is that traditions and practises can be interpreted with polar opposite meanings depending on the interest group. The three interviewees I carried out also emphasised the fact that this “kindness” does not have to be repaid through fiscal means and can be repaid through taking care of the family. If obligation can be repaid through affection and care should it be deemed harmful or pressurizing? Who is speaking for whom here? After concluding interviews with the young women in Thailand I revisited TTP key informant interview transcripts. I found that only non-Thai people had placed an emphasis on the potentially harmful elements of ‘bun khun’ for young women and their susceptibility to human trafficking. The only Thai key informant who mentioned filial pressures had explicitly stated that there are *also* expectations on boys. This realisation is extremely important for shifting the focus of my research and will be analysed in detail throughout the final section of this chapter, which deals with discourses of difference.

‘Bun khun’ is viewed by the non-Thai key informants as a rather straightforward monetary expectancy between girls and their parents, however Thai women interviewees describe it in much greater depth. This depth highlights components of ‘bun khun’ such as kindness and respect, not bound to financial repayments, and certainly not an expectation solely placed on women. The fact that only non-native TTP key informants emphasise the dangers of culture for women in Thailand illustrates the insider versus outsider debate. This raises the question of whether there will always be a binaristic trap in this debate, or is there a superior voice to speak on topics of cultural practices? The difference in discourse between Thai and non-Thai respondents is clear and the implications of each will be examined later.



## The “New” Culture of Modernity

The previous section has shown that none of the Thai women interviewed for this study nor any of the Thai key informants interviewed for The Thailand Project have highlighted ‘bun khun’ as a harmful practice affecting women in particular. The data from the 489 surveys carried out also challenged assumptions that there are cultural expectations increasing the vulnerabilities of stateless women in northern Thailand. But what has arisen from the interviews I carried out over Skype with young women in Thailand, is a discourse on the dangers of the “new culture”. According to the interviewees there is now a culture of modernisation and consumerism that may be just as problematic as the old culture was thought to be.

Two of the ten key informants for TTP, both of them Thai, cited materialism in relation to cause of human trafficking. KI-3 stated that “materialism is one cause to push people to work abroad”. Some of the victims of human trafficking previously interviewed by KI-3 had said “We don’t have a car, big house or mobile phone so we are poor, we have to earn more money”. The other Thai informant also discussed cases where young girls see returnee migrant workers in their community. KI-4 said that:

“The people in the community want to go with them because they want to buy cell phones, beautiful clothes; they don’t want to study anymore, some girls... the picture in their mind is to work in a beautiful place and earn money. That is very strong in the teenager in the tribal community now.”

During the interviews I carried out, P’Aor also confirmed the modern phenomenon of people wanting to move from their rural homes to bigger cities in order to keep up-to-date with their peers:

“I think now Thai people have gone crazy about technology. I know people, they haven’t a lot of money but they still want an iPhone, iPad, a new car, a big house. Because [of] one thing, they see a lot of people having it and they want to have it.”

Consumerism is posited here as a catalyst for pressure on the young. The Thai informants believe that despite not having money, Thai people feel they need the latest trends. The discourse here argues against the (predominantly Western) notion that consumerism and

liberalism are advantageous for women. I have said earlier that the act of agency by young women seeking better lives in bigger cities may not necessarily be an articulation of resistance. If such life choices are acts of resistance against traditions and cultural expectations then it is worth taking into account Brian Morris's discussion of Tony Bennett's argument. Bennett asserts that resisting one power may simply be following another order (Bennett, 1998 cited in Morris, 2004). Is consumerism and modernity replacing traditions and customs as sources of pressure for women in northern Thailand? Is this transition a much needed opportunity for women to execute acts of agency or must it be viewed as equally, if not more, problematic for women?

When P'Latda was asked if it is important for people in Thailand to earn money for getting nice things her response was "yes it is a big problem this thing in Thailand". P'Latda expressed a strong distaste for this "new culture" of keeping up-to-date with fashion and technology:

"You know Thai young culture has a culture and behaviour that they have to have new fashions, they have to update for everything. If you [do] not, everyone will talk to you: 'you're so old, you're so old' ... If someone have an iPhone they feel 'I have to have it too, I need the iPhone'. That's so bad, bad."

P'Latda framed Thai people's desire for fashion and modernity as something that is potentially dangerous for young people:

"If they don't have money they can do something so dangerous, maybe go outside [of the community] with another one, to make money. Maybe some Thai young girl come from a poor family and go to a big city, to Bangkok, they don't have money but they can do everything."

I interpret P'Latda's view that young girls preferably stay within their community as being quite traditionalist – she is hinting here at the dangers of sex-work. Her concern for the dangers of women leaving the home in order to make money may have been framed by her background as an NGO worker. It can be the mandate of NGOs that women are educated at the organisation to eventually take-up employment at the organisation itself. It would be high on the agenda of these NGOs that women stay out of sex-work. The argument that women should never choose, or feel forced to choose, to enter sex-work removes the prospect for women to be agents of such choice and also falls into a rhetoric of women as victims. The

opinions by Thai people, that there are grave dangers involved with consumerism and freedom of movement, can be interpreted by a Western feminist as anti-female. This is due in part to Western feminism's tradition of fighting for autonomy of the body in all aspects of work, career and education. However, the idea that women should leave behind their customs and traditions in search of a sophisticated materialistic way-of-life is characteristic of the justifications made for colonial expeditions and so these views cannot be held up against those of P'Latda's as being exemplary.

Rather than old traditions and cultural expectations serving to harm young people, Thai informants believe it is in fact the loss of those values that can be to their detriment. As pointed out in the previous section, P'Latda is especially nostalgic about the "old culture" and frequently stated "I miss it". This concern among some Thai people that the new culture of modernity has potential dangers contrasts sharply with the conventional expectations that had originally shaped this study. These apparently juxtaposed discourses require disentangling in order to avoid a dichotomization into good versus bad, and this will be done in the following section.

## Discourses of Difference: Modernity and Tradition

What has emerged transparently from the interviews so far are two divergent discourses. Interviewees have outlined what they believe are cultural sources of danger for women, stateless or otherwise, in northern Thailand. Thai informants and interviewees are pointing to the phenomenon of consumerism as putting pressure on people today. The non-Thai opinion is that cultural expectations and traditions are the catalysts for pressure on young women. The disparity here illustrates the concerns I discussed in the Theoretical Framework chapter on theories of representation: who is speaking for whom and who can speak? Within this final section of the Data Analysis chapter I will work through the issues arising from apparently dichotomous dialogues.

### Westernization

As an outsider looking in, my own pre-defined ideas on cultural expectations of women have been challenged. The research aim of this study was to look for the ways in which cultural expectations increase the vulnerabilities of stateless women. The voices of Thai women have contradicted this theory and replaced it with their own concern that a culture of consumerism has become central in Thai society.

A simmering theme of Westernization emerged upon realisation that it had only been people from Western countries proposing the idea that Thai culture creates vulnerabilities for women. Discourse on the higher financial expectations of women potentially reifies the ‘women as victim’ narrative, in this case as victims of ‘bun khun’. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has famously noted how Western feminist scholarship constructs and objectifies the Nonwestern woman as a victim (1991). The idea that women are victims of the backwardness of their own cultures, that they form a category of oppressed “Third World women” and need freeing, was used as a rationale for a large part of the colonial movement. Therefore even the modern idea of women bound by an old oppressive culture has subtle colonial undertones of a native and pure Other in need of sophistication by Westerners.

Caution must be maintained however before an outright dismissal of non-Thai people’s views on ‘bun khun’. Outsiders have the advantages of external perspectives that can reveal things hidden from insiders. P’Aor, a young women from northern Thailand, was stateless for the

majority of her life and has now been living in the U.S. for several years, giving her a partial position as both insider and outsider. She was the only one out of the three interviewees to gesture towards potential harmful implications of ‘bun khun’. She said:

“[Parents] want to have money and this and that... And as a kid, whatever our parents said ‘you have to do this or that’ we have to listen to our parents”.

It is not possible to say whether her life experience in the U.S. has influenced this specific sentiment. But her statement does diverge from the norm of other Thai opinions and may well be an example of how our environment and life experiences can be reflected through our attitudes to issues such as culture.

A conflict of opinions occurs not only between insiders and outsiders but as P’Aor has shown through her sentiment above, contradictions permeate community discourse also. Overall, Thai informants did not pinpoint ‘bun khun’ as an endangering custom. Due to the fact that there are less opportunities for stateless people, they may feel a greater pressure when practising ‘bun khun’ in a financial mode. P’Aor herself was stateless for the majority of her life and so is also speaking from a place of experience. The findings from this study should not effectuate the idea that non-natives should be circumscribed from doing cross-cultural work. But it does serve as a warning flag to the importance of engaging with local standpoints and being open to images or hypotheses other than that of Nonwestern women constrained by their culture. Without the voices of Thai people this study may have reified an imperial view of a harmful Asian culture, as was put forward by TTP informants. At the same time, there have been conflicting views between the women I interviewed from Thailand. P’Latda believes young Thai people are forgetting about their culture and families while P’Aor and P’Khai insist that culture and family are as important as ever to them and other young Thai people.

### Tradition and Technophobia

The purpose of including the voices of Thai people on the topic of cultural expectations was to provide the development of TTP’s intervention strategy with local, partial and accountable views from their target group, in other words to respond to Haraway’s call for “strong objectivity” . The voices of these women are not regarded as the all-knowing subjects or privileged authentic voices of the people. Trinh Minh-Ha reminds us that “there can hardly be

such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders” (1991, p.75). That being said the Thai informants, both for this study and The Thailand Project, have brought something new to the table. Their concern over the new wave of technophilia and materialism challenges the theory set-out in the beginning of this thesis that there it is traditional cultural expectations that are creating vulnerabilities for women in Thailand.

Thai people have expressed distress over the phenomenon of materialism. Pressure to stay in vogue is not interpreted by the interviewees and informants as resistance to ‘harmful’ customs like ‘bun khun’, instead it’s seen as resistance to treasured cultural values. The shift of everyday practices from being family-orientated to being consumerist shows a resistance to culture that actually follows another order. I argue that there is a mesh of both agency and structural power encircling the relationship between Thai people and their “new culture”. Women are exerting agency through their decisions to migrate, to seek employment for a better livelihood and/or to become more independent and modern. Structural power is represented by the supremacy of consumerism and may be inescapable as one falls subject to the desires that it creates. I would further argue that by choosing consumerism or migration, women are docile agents rather than intentional revolutionaries against oppressive customs. Both P’Aor and P’Khai who have migrated from their rural homes do not see their migration as an act of resistance to an old culture. They have taken their culture with them and continue to practice customs such as ‘bun khun’.

Since consumerism is unlikely to vanish it may in time become normalized within Thai society and discourse. Rather than celebrate this as resistance to cultural expectations or to fear it as the end of ‘pure’ traditional values we can work through its implications on different groups in Thai society, particularly on stateless people. On the one hand, the dynamics of a consumerist-driven culture imposes strong pressure on all classes of people trying to extract a type of lifestyle that is not easy to afford. The survey results from the Intersectionality section at the beginning of this chapter highlighted the fact that stateless people (stateless women especially) are at a greater disenfranchised position than those with citizenship, both in terms of finances and on a scale of life satisfaction. P’Aor has indicated the hardship of life for stateless people who are unable to get a good job, and yet for whom money for big houses and cars are really important. Potentially there are economic, social and cultural implications for the “new culture” that Thai people feel are detrimental and in need of address. On the other hand, a technophobic ideology stems from a romanticized view of the past. A romantic

mythos valorizes authenticity categorizing technology as destructive and harmful (Giesler, 2012).

Morris has pointed to the importance of thinking about what to do once resistance is ‘tracked down’. In this instance the resistance to Thailand’s “old culture” invokes an ambivalent discourse on the salvation or damnation of technology. The implications of the technophobic discourse in Thailand can be taken forward as a consideration during TTP intervention strategy development: the arduous effects of modernization for disenfranchised groups combined with the impossibility of returning to a pre-technological past.

### Webbing of Discourses

But simply polarizing the Traditionalist discourse against the Modernist discourse is dangerous too. As Uma Narayan says “like all binaries, one pole is overvalued” (2000). In this instance, the discourse least favoured can be disparaged to suit the agenda of the power group and further its interests. As shown above, both discourses have serious drawbacks needing to be addressed rather than dismissed. Binaries also suppress similarities and overlap. Carolyn Pedwell recommends a web metaphor as it “signifies complexity and multiplicity... as well as relationality” (2008). This is important in light of the heteroglossia of opinions that characterises the research reported here. The discourses do not lie in isolation from each other. For example, the choices people make in relation to migration, can incorporate both a desire to keep up-to-date with trends and simultaneously provide remittances to their family. The point here is that women choosing to migrate should not be viewed as passive victims to a harmful culture and subject to a wealth of vulnerabilities. But rather we can view such women as docile agents, executing freedom of choice while embracing a culture that, like so many others, value the emotional and financial contributions of family.



CHAPTER SIX

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# CONCLUSION

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From the conversations that emerged throughout my research I have been forced to permit a space for Thai women's opinions that were not 'of the right kind' for my hypothesis. Standpoint theory was the foundational approach used – it allowed alterity to proliferate and my hypothesis to be challenged. The engagement with the standpoints of P'Khai, P'Aor and P'Latda's has reshaped this thesis's primary concern about the vulnerabilities that culture can impose. These women's knowledge and experience have created an additional angle from which one can perceive Thai people's relationship with culture and modernity. My use of standpoints does not hold-up the interviewees as all-knowing insiders or hold their opinions as a homogenous representation of 'the inside'. There is no privileged authentic 'voice of the people' since each one of us has temporal and situated experiences that have shaped our opinions. Insiders have not been valued over outsiders in this research, nor vice-versa. Besides, it is not for me to determine a classification of insider or outsider for each informant and interviewee. The non-native informants have experience living/working in Thailand, while many of the native informants have experience outside of Thailand. A significant limitation of this study is the fact that only three women participated in the Skype interviews. More participants would have added to strength of the conclusions, while undoubtedly adding to the sometimes confusing and contradictory results.

The multiplicities of each of the interviewee's identities has created a multitude of voices, competing and conflicting and creating disruptive influences, confirming that culture is something that cannot be ordered in a single direction. Rather than reify the insider versus outsider dichotomy I believe their discourses are webbed – both are debating culture through women's autonomy whilst being concerned about the livelihood and well-being of women in Thailand. Engaging with this heteroglossia of voices has created a nuanced view of women and their relationship with culture in Thailand today. Tradition as it was once known now takes a new form in the lives of women.

The first important outcome from this study is the discovery that in the current situation in Thailand modernization and tradition may not be a binary oppositional: it is considered modern to migrate to bigger cosmopolitan cities and at the same time it is a means of upholding the financial commitments of 'bun khun'. It may be necessary to re-think the representation of women who are at a cross-roads between modernization and tradition, abandoning the image of a woman struck down by harmful cultural practices. Fascination with acquiring iPhones and iPads is the image juxtaposed by Thai informants against one of a simpler, family-orientated way of life. Is this move towards modernization what Michel de

Certeau would describe as “tactics”, a practice of resistance that transgresses the order? Or is this movement more of a reflection of Sara Mahmood’s vision of docile agents? Moving towards modernization does not necessarily have to be resistance to tradition but simply an exercise of agency. From here an investigation can begin into the needs of stateless women who value their traditions and customs but who also feel the desire to migrate for personal reasons. It is recommended that on the basis of my interviewees’ valuable contributions, future studies would investigate the idea of vulnerabilities through relationships to consumerism and modernization, and not only to traditions and customs.

It is difficult to conclude from both The Thailand Project statistical data and the qualitative data I collected through interviews that filial obligation is gendered in Thailand. Thai participants insisted on the importance and prevalence of ‘bun khun’ in the lives of both men and women. But, and this is the second important finding of the present study, according to interviewees P’Khai, P’Latda and P’Aor, practising ‘bun khun’ is not inherently harmful,. ‘Bun khun’ need not always be repaid on a financial basis, since taking care of family members is regarded as being just as important. The concern of five of TTP key informants was specifically about women’s subordinate position in Thailand, and relevant literature on women’s oppression has made a proverb of women as “the hind legs of the elephant”. But there was no clear-cut way of concluding from the qualitative and quantitative data presented here that women are the most vulnerable group in Thailand. In light of this it is a limitation of my study that stateless men were not included as interview participants. Their experiences with ‘bun khun’ and their position in Thai society would make a valuable future study.

Instead, and this is the third important finding, stateless people, both men and women, live the most disenfranchised existence, under domination by those with the power of citizenship. In terms of financial well-being, stateless men, and women with citizenship, appear to share similar negative experiences. They do not share similar modes of identity but the fact that they are subject to one of two oppressive catalysts, gender or statelessness, creates a unique shared experience of inequality. Work being conducted by officials and organisations in Thailand and abroad needs to concentrate efforts on addressing the needs of stateless people there. The crucial shift in focus to make is from the view of women as victims of culture to the realities of stateless people as victims of bureaucracy and a denial of access to human rights.

Input from my interview-participants has shown that women in Thailand are metaphorically ‘entering the streets’ through their disobedience to parent’s wishes, through following new trends, and through migration to bigger cities. Women’s attention towards becoming modern is seen as dangerous by Thai people and as concurring with the loss of an “old culture” which, as the literature has shown, was a culture of male domination. The non-Thai discourse argues that Thai culture and traditions are synonymous with oppression and the victimization of women within their filial institutions. But such a dialogue fails to grant any agency to women in their relationship with their own cultural beliefs, and fails to account for the relationship between men and their culture. The greatest recommendation that this study can make is to add to the continuous calls from feminist circles that more complex female subjectivity be sought in all conversations over culture.

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