

Chapter 9: Sex workers in Bangkok

Refashioning female identities in the global pleasure space

From the book: *Bangkok: Place, practice and representation*
Marc Askew

Introduction: representations of Bangkok as sex capital

On the global map of tourism and travel, Thailand, and particularly Bangkok, stands out as a key space of sexual pleasure and consumption. In western print media, and in TV broadcasting, programmes on Patpong night life featuring the evocative term 'sex tourism', often linked with HIV-AIDS issues, are always sure of a wide viewing and listening audience. The persistent popular western stereotype of Bangkok as a world centre of sexual pleasure for foreign men (e.g. 'the sexual supermarket of Asia') developed during the 1970s in the wake of its use as a Rest and Recreation (R & R) place for US servicemen (e.g. *Washington Post* 11 August 1978). In the decade 1975-85 the ratio of male to female foreign tourists entering Thailand increased from 2:1 to 3:1, and there is little doubt that the increasing number of tourist-orientated sex venues in Bangkok and Thailand's resort towns (both for heterosexual and homosexual men) was a principal attraction (Meyer 1988: 256). In 1984, one of the most famous hit songs was 'One Night in Bangkok' (written, ironically, to mark a chess tournament held in the city). Its lyrics show how strongly the image of the city and its tourist red-light districts had merged in the western imaginary:

One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster, the bars are temples, but the girls ain't free, You'll find a God in every Golden Oyster, and if you're lucky then the God's a She, I can feel an Angel slidin' next to me.

The strength of this global media-driven image of Bangkok was impressed upon the Thai public in 1993 when *Time Magazine* reporting on world prostitution, featured a front cover picture showing a Bangkok bar girl sitting in the lap of a western male customer. Interestingly, very little of the feature article dealt with Bangkok or Thailand, but the icon of Bangkok was a key image for the sale of this issue (Hornblower 1993). In the same year the *Longman's World Dictionary* featured a controversial entry referring to Thailand as a 'place of prostitutes', which created justifiable outrage among government leaders. The *Bangkok Post* commented on the *Time Magazine* issue, noting:

When we talk about perfume we think France. When we talk about rugs we think Persia. As for Thailand, an image or product with which most people associate used to be teak, rice or the easy smile. But gauging from the international media's coverage during the past several years, that easy Thai smile has now been replaced by scantily-clad young girls - prostitutes, to be direct. (Bangkok Post 9 July 1993)

Despite the efforts of the Thai government to counter these global stereotypes (for example, by promoting family tourism) the stereotyping of Bangkok as global sex capital persists, underlining the ways that both images and global economies reinforce each other. Interestingly, the well-known haunts of commercialized sex in western countries (Times Square in New York and the red-light district of Amsterdam, for example) have received much less publicity in the world press. As Richard Parker notes: 'Much like race, sexuality ... has been neatly packaged as an especially important figure in the range of images used to distinguish North from South, the First World from the Third World, the developed nations from the developing countries' (Parker 1999: 1). The ways in which images of Thai female sexuality have been generated in various forms (literature and film) by western 'orientalism' - the western fascination with the exotic 'other' of Asia - have received increasing attention by scholars (Hamilton 1998; Manderson 1998). Significantly, however, much of this western scholarship on prostitution in Thailand and other countries of Southeast Asia (such as the Philippines) has adopted its own version of the global media stereotypes, underlined by theoretical assumptions which posit the victimization and passiveness of 'Asia' in the global economy of sexual pleasure. New feminist approaches to sex work in the west have emphasized that women can exercise agency through assertive displays of their sexuality and desire (Zatz 1997). However, with only rare exceptions (see Odzer 1994) Asian sex workers remain consigned to

victimhood status in western feminist accounts of prostitution (e.g. LeMoncheck 1997: 110-11). The image of passivity and powerlessness extends to the portrayal of Bangkok's landscape: thus, we find one American scholar describing 'the whole city' as 'an erotic theme park' an essentially passive space for tourist consumption (Robinson 1993). In one sense, such statements simply point to the most conspicuous element in Bangkok's function as an international tourist city - but the caricature also betrays the continuing orientalism of much western scholarship, which disregards the reality that the multiple exploitative power of global consumption industries - such as sex orientated tourism - may be subject to mediation, appropriation and contestation at the local level by the Thai women and men engaged in the sex trade (for discussion on this point see Ryan 2000). Like other large cities of the world and the Asian region, the sexual life and economy of Bangkok has its own history, shaped both by changes in society and their intersection with broader cultural and economic processes (see e.g. Barne 1997; Ong-at 1990 for Bangkok; de Manila 1980; Hershatter 1997 for Manila and Shanghai). Notably, the Thai metropolis is the site for the formation of a variety of sexual cultures (lesbian, transsexual and gay) which are part of a complex of global sexual cultures and identity formation (Altman 2001: Chapter 6). These have ramified into the worlds of local and tourist-orientated prostitution in the city (Anand 1997; Storer 1999). Here I focus on Thai women sex workers.

In this chapter, I suggest that Bangkok's red-light districts - often seen as a constructed pleasure space of the tourist-orientated sex trade, are as much made, sustained and manipulated by women sex workers themselves as by the infrastructure and foreign clientele of commercialized sex services. Through studying the life narratives and practices of women as they, engage and disengage with prostitution and the Thai metropolis, it is possible to develop an alternative perspective of how Bangkok is used and constituted. I re-examine and re-contextualize the practices of prostitution in terms of the interacting spatial/sociocultural fields within which women engage as they strategize towards accumulating survival and status resources. I treat women sex workers here not as complete 'victims' of an unequal Thai sex-gender order and global political economy of sexual exploitation, but as agents with the capacity to transform their lives. They do so in the micro-spaces of their interaction with foreign men and through the deployment of cultural capital as they move between key spheres of their lives, between lovers, peers and families.

Thai prostitution and the tourist-orientated sex trade -dominant approaches and alternatives

The macro-processes of east-west global tourism, the political economy of the Thai tourism industry and the patterns of regional and socio-economic inequalities which underlie the gendered nature of poverty, in addition to the Buddhist religious norms which relegate women to a lesser moral status, have all been well-treated in the literature pertaining to prostitution in Thailand (Enloe 1989; Keyes 1984; Muecke 1992; Pasuk 1982; Truong 1990). The structural conditions underlying the rise of foreign-orientated prostitution and the much larger phenomenon of domestic prostitution both overlap and depart from each other. Regional inequalities have been exacerbated by a Bangkok-centered process of development, which led to the metropolis drawing on the rural communities as a surplus labor pool. Rural men, and increasingly women, were drawn into the urban formal and informal labor market, prostitution being one of the submarkets (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 186-9). The commercialized domestic sex trade focusing on brothels, massage parlors, hotels and entertainment venues emerged with expanding incomes which supported an expanding clientele for sexual services in Thailand from the late 1950s. This expansion was unrelated to foreign tourism (Sukanya 1983). The structural changes underlying the growth of tourist-orientated prostitution by the 1980s were clear. The foreign-orientated sex trade followed the expansion in the tourism sector generally from the mid-1970s and was given the blessing (indirectly) of the state through tourism promotion. Tourism expanded dramatically to form a significant foreign currency-earner for the Thai economy whose fortunes had become bound to the global marketplace, not just in resources, but in services (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 148-9).

The structural demographic and labor market shifts and their links with Thailand's open economy are the undeniable macro contexts within which we must comprehend the experiences of ordinary Thais, among them women entering prostitution as a survival strategy. Nonetheless, in relation to foreign-orientated prostitution at least, the dominance of this perspective has tended to overshadow a number of key dimensions of the practice of commercial sex itself and the contexts of this practice. Prostitution is not just another form of 'off-farm labor'; it bespeaks a range of transformations that extend beyond the simple tradition/modernization dichotomies which posit collapsing village societies and alienating urban labor markets. Women's experiences are not just an effort to shore up the disintegrating village social structure

through dutifully remitting money to their families - their identities are tied into wider sociospatial transformations where they are redefining themselves in Thai society. This gap in understanding is expressed well in the reluctance of the Marxist-feminist scholar Than-Dam Truong to explore women's motivations and consciousness in her structural study of the political economy of sex and tourism in Southeast Asia. Truong devotes only one paragraph to the 'world view' of female sex workers, cursorily remarking that it is 'rather complex', largely perhaps because from the vantage point of Marxist-feminism, while large numbers of sex workers are engaged in a form of labor (through commodification of their sexuality), they are not conscious of themselves as a class for-itself: rather, they interpret their situations individually and often seek solutions in relationships with customers/lovers (Truong 1990: 187).

This begs a whole range of questions about just what sexual labor involves, both in terms of women's approach to it as paid work and other dimensions, such as their experiences of such labor - treated in terms of movement, changing contexts of work and relationships. Much recently published work on the tourist-orientated sex trade (in Thailand and elsewhere) basically repeats the truisms of earlier political economy scholars, implying a monolithic sex industry, coordinated sex tourism and third world/first world dualities of power (e.g. Bishop and Robinson 1998; Thiesmeyr 1999). So too, the complicated realities underlying sex-trafficking are often oversimplified to construct a uniform stereotype of Thai women's victimhood, despite key differences within and between domestic and tourist-orientated prostitution (note the critique by Lisa Law 1999). However, studies by anthropologists are beginning to show that a far more complex process than previously acknowledged is at play (e.g. Lyttleton 1994). It is perhaps unsurprising that these more sophisticated perspectives have been developed through detailed ethnographic research - the best of it conducted in the native language of the informants (unlike western political economy-based studies). A recent ethnographic study by one adventurous young Thai women academic (who disguised herself as a bar worker for her research in Chiang Mai bars) strongly supports the argument that women in tourist-orientated prostitution are active, assertive and skilled agents in the interactions that take place in the red-light districts (Mukdawan 2000).

This chapter focuses on the Sukhumvit Road area, which hosts one of the key tourist red-light zones of Bangkok. It is based on an ethnographic study of women sex workers in beer bars, restaurants, expatriate bars and go-go bars. Bangkok is by no means the only place of tourist-prostitute encounters, but this area focus brings into relief some important interactions of spatial and social practices which in turn relate to some more general processes occurring in Thai society, particularly among women of rural origin.

Concepts towards a spatial anthropology of tourist-orientated sex work

A number of key concepts used in the following discussion should first be outlined. I treat women as 'agents' having the capacity to devise projects and act on them, following Sherry Ortner's useful definition as 'the capacity of social beings to interpret and morally evaluate the situation to formulate projects and try to enact them' (Ortner 1995: 185). At the same time such agency is mobilized in a set of strategies based on a set of value-orientations which, while not derived from an unchanging cultural base, are nevertheless grounded in a set of dispositions (or *habitus*, following Bourdieu 1977: 78-87) towards achieving certain key cultural capital. I use this framework of 'practice', much as I have done in earlier chapters of this book, to illuminate the significance of cultural patterns in contemporary Thai society and the metropolis. Such key cultural capital is expressed in status markers which are connected to identity formation. Yet it should be noted there that women engaged in various forms of sex work, like their sisters in other walks of life, construct their identities in multiple ways. Selfhood, as a constructed and dynamic site of 'being-in-the-world' (for which see Kondo 1990: 31-48), is expressed and constituted in a number of fields, including the domestic (family), the peer group (friends) and the sexual (lovers/partners). I will argue that prostitution is a project in the recovery of selfhood, and is directed to achieving material and emotional gains following the trauma and disillusion which forms the background for many women's entry into the commercialized sex world. This focus does not discount the broad structural dimensions of inequality (the economic, gendered and religious frameworks) within which women enter and practice prostitution, but it-reorientates our attention to the ways women negotiate and make choices (albeit constrained choices) within a range of contexts.

It is important to conceive of Thai women sex workers' practices as simultaneously social, temporal and spatial. Drawing on the propositions of the feminist geographer Linda McDowell, I suggest here that the ongoing construction of these women's identity takes place through a series of cross-cutting locations in which the different aspects of the self vary. Moreover, these women actively 'construct' space through material, social, performative and symbolic activity (McDowell 1996: 41). I draw on these insights

in using the terms 'oscillation', 'place' and 'arena' to encompass the dynamic spatial dimensions of women sex workers practices in Bangkok and beyond. The term oscillation refers to women's irregular patterns of circulation between the country and city. It is distinct from migration because of this irregularity and frequency and unpredictability (see Chant and Radcliffe 1992: 11-12). More than simply geographical movement between points, oscillation also describes women's movement between spaces of significance in their lives. It may be expressed in terms such as the engagement of women in the modernity of the city and the tradition of rural society (Mills 1997), but it is more complex than this, because the level of transformation in Thai society and economy is such that the consumption patterns and expectations associated with modernity are present in villages as well as urban areas (Rigg 1994, 1997). For women sex workers, 'rural' and 'urban' are in fact overlapping fields of economic and social significance in their lives, and they share multiple engagements with such fields with other Thai women.

Utilizing Allan Pred's idea of 'practiced place' identities (see Pred 1984), I suggest that women's encounters in the work/entertainment sites that constitute Bangkok's sex tourist zones can be read as practices of appropriation (and thus transformation) of spaces through interpersonal encounters and renegotiation of their identities. Apprehension of this process needs to take into account not only the performative contexts of commercialized sex work, but the framework of role perceptions acted out in relationships across the tourist zones and beyond, and, importantly, the way that prostitution is an episode in, to use Pred's expression, 'biography formation'. Women use the sites - the infrastructure as-it-were - to develop, as much as possible, personalized relations which then ramify beyond the bars themselves into a set of significant spheres for identity building. In the red-light zones and beyond, women pursue strategies (a broad set of objectives). Strategies may have multiple goals: for such women it can include revenge on Thai ex-husbands, support for family members and collective projects, rebuilding material and moral prestige in the public arena (through consumption goods and lucrative partnerships with foreigners), and emotional/sexual security. Encounters with customers (*khack*) - who are often transmuted into lovers (*faen*) in these encounters - occur across a range of sites in the city which are utilized as arenas of action where women skillfully act in engaging foreign men in romantic dramas and relationships.

Building a city of women: the infrastructure of commercial sex

Prostitution in Thailand is founded on long-standing patterns of structured economic and gender inequality, supported by a value system which marginalizes women in terms of moral worth and power, yet impels them to assume key economic and social responsibilities. Foreign tourism has played a minor role in its overall growth (Sukanya 1983: 30). Nonetheless the women engaged in various forms of tourist-orientated prostitution today are a most conspicuous group, because of their high visibility in venues located in the established and modernized downtown areas of the metropolis and resort centers (such as Pattaya and Phuket) (Wathini and Guest 1994: 16). Bangkok's local underworld of prostitution was established from the mid-nineteenth century and its growth was directly linked to the expansion of demand for sexual services generated by the Chinese male immigrant workforce of the city. The Chinese quarter of Sampheng was the acknowledged centre of the city's brothels (often located near gambling dens and markets) and the larger number of prostitutes were indentured Chinese and Japanese women trafficked into Siam (Skinner 1957: 126). The involvement of Thai women in this trade appears to have been minimal at this time. Among the Thai, the prevalence of polygamy and slavery (largely debt slavery) allowed many men the privileges of sexual access to women without the need for prostitutes. So established was Sampheng as the city's red-light area that well into the twentieth century the term *Sao Sampheng* (Sampheng Girl) was widely used as a euphemism for prostitute, even after Thai women began entering the trade in large numbers from the 1950s. In the nineteenth century, the hotels and drinking houses along Charoen Krung Road patronized by foreigners (particularly seamen) featured prostitutes from Russia and other western countries. In 1928 there were 203 licensed brothels with 974 prostitutes in Bangkok, although there were at least a further 2000 non-registered prostitutes working in the city (Meyer 1988: 315). Thai women began entering the sex trade of the city in large numbers only from the 1950s, when Chinese immigration flows were stemmed. By this time, modes and venues of commercialized sex had diversified. The standard brothel venue persisted in Sampheng, but also expanded to the Thewet district along Wisut Kasat Road. Massage parlors - popularized by the Japanese military during the occupation years of the 1940s - were reintroduced and included sexual services. The cosmopolitan clubs at venues such as the Trocadero (Surawong Road) included dancing clubs where patrons (Thai and foreign) could negotiate the price of sex with the women who worked as hired dancers. Other sex workers included 'Taxi Girls' who arranged with clients to meet in their hotels or homes - they were popular among the increasing numbers of

foreign men working in Bangkok (Krull and Melcher 1966: 38-9). Although prostitution was declared illegal in 1960, prostitution flourished in a disguised form (in hairdressing salons, for example), or through the simple expedient of payments to police. Hotels were a common venue for small massage parlors or brothels. In the 1970s, one western researcher studying Bangkok's potential tourist accommodation noted with surprise that most of the city's second-class hotels (largely Chinese-owned and managed) were little more than camouflaged brothels (Donner 1978: 834). By this time 'short-time' motels and hotels (*Rongraem Chuakhrao*) had become part of the city's diverse landscape of sexual liaison: they were the places where married men could meet mistresses, young men could have sex with sweethearts and both groups could hire prostitutes in secret.

Bangkok's foreign-orientated sex trade (like that in Manila) was stimulated from the mid-1960s by the surge in demand accompanying the US military Rest and Recreation (R & R) programme, which brought thousands of servicemen to the metropolis. The R & R programme quickly stimulated the development of a commercial foreign-orientated sex service infrastructure. The entertainment demands of US servicemen helped transform Bangkok's premier middle-class district of Sukhumvit (and nearby Phetchaburi Road) into an entertainment strip, comprising bars and hotels. But it was the expanding expatriate civilian population of these years (albeit nourished by Vietnam-related money flows) that laid the basis for Bangkok's best-known red-light district, Patpong Road (Dawson 1988: 39-41). Go-go dancing was first introduced into Patpong in 1969, and helped to stimulate a growth period in that precinct. By the late 1970s Bangkok's red-light district of Patpong was already famous, and the Sukhumvit area was also well-known. However the period of commercialization and large-scale investment began only in 1982, when small shophouse bars were enlarged to become glamorous and slick venues. Live shows and sex acts were introduced in Patpong from 1984 (Dawson 1988: 95). By this time there had been a dispersal of the night life infrastructure. 'Soi Cowboy' in the Sukhumvit area (named after the first bar-owner, an ex US airman) was developed in the early 1980s featuring a largely expatriate clientele and small shophouse bars. By 1985 there were 50 bars in that small street. Like Patpong, Soi Cowboy changed character from 1986, when new German bar owners expanded the size of their venues to fit more customers and glamorize surroundings. An extra street of night clubs opened in Patpong to serve an exclusively Japanese clientele. By the mid-1980s a new area of expatriate bars had emerged in the vicinity of the newly-built Washington Cinema. The first of these bars had transferred from Patpong under the pressure of rising costs of rent and competition with Chinese syndicates. In the same period the Nana Entertainment Plaza, a three-level court of twenty go-go bars - opened in the Sukhumvit district to take advantage of the expansion of tourist hotels in that area. Old GI hotels had been converted to short-time hotels for freelance prostitutes and their customers; alternatively, like the Grace Hotel (formerly a US officers' R & R hotel) some opened coffee shops as meeting places. The wave of German tourists of the mid-1980s caused a boom in open air beer gardens, which were open to freelance prostitutes. A range of taverns and small open-air beer bars and late-night coffee lounges (notably those of the 'Therme' Turkish baths and the Malaysia Hotel) were also operating. This variety of venues characterizes the zone today (see Fig. 9.1)

We should note a number of features of the emergent sex-trade infra-structure in Bangkok. First, tourism in general was not well promoted by the state until the mid-1980s; rather, the initiatives stemmed from private sector investment. Despite the significance of the statistic that tourism revenues surpassed those from the export of rice in 1982, official investment in Thai tourism infrastructure was low and belated. Linda Richter (1989: 81-3) has noted the fragmented and uncoordinated development of tourism infrastructure and the considerable diversity of modes of tourism. In-such a framework it is difficult to see how sex tourism could have been so well coordinated by different business interests within Thailand. Truong's work attempts to find links between key actors in government, capital and tourism sectors, but finds little direct match. While there was some articulation between officialdom and business in the forging of the R & R contracts, supplying accommodation and sex services to American service personal, the militarization metaphor weakens when the period after US withdrawal is considered. Truong also provides some statistics about the small-scale investment in massage parlor's, tea houses and go-go bars in the late 1970s, but is unable to unravel tourist-related and local prostitution markets. Acknowledging the diversity of levels of services in the sex trade infrastructure, she establishes linkages on a general level only; Sand implies that imbalances in hotel investment favoring large establishments constrained smaller ventures to find ways of attracting group tours, which apparently bore fruit in sex tours. The evidence for these causal changes is minimal (Truong 1990: 170-1).

The persistent use of the terms sex industry and sex tourism by researchers implies a monolithic system: in reality it is multilayered and disarticulated. It is united (but not coordinated) only through the

concentration of complementary venues – coffee shops in several key locations, the component venues of which gain from the agglomeration economies of proximity, but whose ownership patterns and workers are diverse. Hence in the districts of Patpong and Sukhumvit we find not only standard three star hotels, but short-time hotels and motels (otherwise known as curtain hotels), outdoor bars, indoor bars, massage parlors and discotheques as well as karaoke clubs and restaurants. These districts provide venues which act as sites for a variety of markets to operate simultaneously in the same space. To impute monopolies of ownership from such spatial concentrations is highly questionable. Similarly, the highly-publicized organized sex tours (which gave birth to the term sex tourism) to Thailand from Germany and Japan flourished for only a brief period in the early 1980s, before being publicly denounced both in the countries of origin and Thailand. Some western academics still imply that coordinated sex tours still exist; in fact they are not necessary for the purposes of foreign men in search of sex in Thailand. As early as 1982 over 50 per cent of foreign tourists to Thailand (70 per cent male) were return visitors (Economist Intelligence Unit 1984: 24). They knew where to go and where to stay without the aid of promotion agencies.

By 1987, a year the Thai government promoted as 'Visit Thailand Year', there were well-established concentrations of sex-related entertainment venues in Bangkok, as well as the burgeoning beach resorts of Pattaya and Phuket. Young rural women boosted the tourism subsector of the city that was entertaining ever greater numbers of foreigners. In 1987 foreign visitors numbered 3.5 million, an increase of 24 per cent over the previous year (Bangkok Bank 1988: 35). Of these tourists to Thailand the majority were males, representing an average of 65 per cent of all western tourists. Among foreign tourists from the Asian region there was an even higher imbalance in favor of men. This disproportionate figure could not be explained by business trips by males, since over 85 per cent of western, Middle Eastern and Asian tourists came for the expressly declared purpose of holidays. In particular the West German and Japanese tourists were dominated by males (65 per cent and 75 per cent respectively). These were the very groups who were having a major impact in the refashioning of sex entertainment venues in Bangkok. Official reports about the success of national tourism policy waxed lyrical about the attractions of Thailand's rich culture and natural settings. This was only part of the story, and local people knew it. In 1991, despite the AIDS pandemic, males still represented 65 per cent of foreign tourists entering Thailand (Bangkok Post 21 February 1993).

Modes of prostitution: worksites and employment regimes

Tourist-orientated prostitution is a form of prostitution undertaken by a minority of women in this highly differentiated industry - an estimated 2 per cent of the women engaged in sex work (Forsyth 1990). It is but a subsector of a larger Thai commercial sex trade, which is estimated to comprise between 150,000 to 800,000 women, depending on whether the estimate is provided by government or NGO sources respectively (Bangkok Post 31 December 1996). The interpretations I offer thus apply to a subset of Thai women engaged in sex work, a group who experience a wide variety of work situations (for which see Wathini and Guest 1994: 39-49).

Precisely because of the variability of its forms in Thailand, prostitution as a transaction between men and women has variable meanings and entails a wide range of experiences for women. For women within the Thai system there are significant differences in work situation, remuneration and clientele. In the low-priced brothels in both city and country towns, Thai men obtain strictly short-term sex services. Large and well-appointed massage parlors, which proliferated from the 1970s, serve a more well-heeled clientele. In Thailand the sale of sex services has for a long time been associated with entertainment. Thus at traditional dance and entertainment venues women are employed as companions for men. Restaurants featuring female singers (*Sao Nakrong*) also provide this service. Commonly the singers will be paid for sitting with guests and will receive garlands and tips as recognition of their singing prowess. Often they will be asked to have sex with the patron and will be paid accordingly. The recent popularity of karaoke nightclubs has expanded the number of venues for women working as companions and singers (Lytton 1994). During the boom years 'member clubs' multiplied for businessmen, while the western model of go-go bars was also introduced (with a notable concentration in the Saphan Khwai area in the northern suburbs). Streetwalking prostitution takes place in a range of settings. Sanam Luang (near the Royal Palace) has long been a site for women who walk the streets in search of customers. The large coffee shops of some well-known hotels serve as meeting places for freelance prostitutes and Thai men. Around Hualamphong railway station a disguised system of casual prostitution operates among some female food vendors as a means to supplement their incomes (Bangkok Post 22 February 1999).

Among female sex workers who deal with westerners in districts such as Sukhumvit, there are a broad range of venues and hence work situations and remuneration. They include the massage parlors, escort services, go-go bars, outdoor beer bars and coffee shops and restaurants. In addition there are expensive cocktail lounges, member clubs, karaoke clubs and member clubs exclusively for Japanese patrons, where women can be taken away for sex for a fee. Most of these forms of venue emerged during the 1960s as a result of increasing western and foreign presence in Thailand and Bangkok, both of expatriate workers and of military personnel. A distinction needs to be drawn between those establishments where women are employed directly and those where they are free to visit and work freelance. In addition, there are bars where women employees' involvement with customers is entirely optional: that is to say, the business of the establishment is not principally to offer sex services, but women can make arrangements with customers if they wish. With conventional work options (such as factory work), offering monthly wages of between 2,000 and 3,000 baht, work in foreign-orientated prostitution offers the possibility of earning between 10,000 and 50,000 baht per month, although there are in fact wide variations in incomes. Whether in freelance work or go-go bars, these earning levels are far superior to the rates earned by women in Thai brothels. None of the women I interviewed had ever considered entering the local sex trade, both because of the low rates and their aversion to Thai clientele. For them, working in a Thai brothel carried a stigma far greater than that associated with tourist-orientated work.

The conditions of work vary considerably. Thus in go-go bars and many hostess bars, women typically receive a nominal salary which they supplement with earnings from sex with customers. Over the last five years, with an apparent reduction in the numbers of women entering the workforce, and an increase in competition among bars in the go-go venues, some bar owners now offer daily rates for dancers. At Patpong and Nana Plaza, women also earn different rates of salary according to whether they dance naked, partly-naked or with swimming costumes. In addition they receive a share of the tips gained at the bar on each evening of their shift. In these bars a series of fines are usually applied to women for various infringements - smoking cigarettes on the job, arriving late for work, etc. Indeed some women have little of this nominal salary left at the end of the month due to numerous fines imposed by managers. On the other hand those with the skill or good fortune to gain regular or frequent customers will offset these losses a hundred-fold with earnings gained through their sexual services. In these bars women cannot leave during their work shift unless the customers pay 'bar fines' to take them out of the work venue. Women working freelance do not share these conditions: they can arrive at the venues whenever they want, and do not need to deal with any onerous rules or regulations. However, these freelance workers need to rely far more on their interpersonal skills in attracting customers, since these bars generally attract large numbers of women (a sex worker/customer ratio of about 3:1) who compete for the clientele.

There are a number of important characteristics about the 'workforce' in this diverse industry. Very few women regard their work in the beer bar and go-go scene as permanent. Work in a go-go bar may involve six months or two, perhaps even four years, depending on circumstances. Change of jobs is also constant as women seek places with better patrons or better employers, or have problems with fellow workers. Other women return to the provinces to find work near their homes and children. Some return from villages to work in Bangkok. Others never return, having given up on the prospect of earning much money, or having made enough money to buy land or invest in a small business. Others marry foreigners and also disappear from the bar scene. At any one time in Bangkok, women working with foreigners will be at different stages of their encounter. Of the women I interviewed, some had just begun work in bars while some came to a bar and returned home after just two or three days; some had accumulated money and others had not; some had long-term boyfriends who sent money regularly, others only experienced short-term encounters with foreign men; some were about to marry and to leave Thailand; others had just returned from holidays overseas. Bar owners in Bangkok, whether Thai or foreign, constantly complain about the difficulty of attracting and keeping women as workers. Notably, one of the major reasons for reduction in numbers of women in any work venue, particularly go-go bars, is the frequency with which women leave work after finding a 'boyfriend' among customers. The nature of the workforce in this industry is thus highly volatile, highlighting the fact that the women are essentially individualistic opportunists and entrepreneurial, often at the expense of bar owner's principal business interests.

The ages of the fifty women studied there ranged from nineteen to forty-two years, with the majority (almost two-thirds) aged between twenty-one and twenty-five. Grouping these women by their work places is somewhat difficult since there is a high degree of movement between modes of sex work (for example, shifts between go-go dancing to hostess work in beer bars). At the time of my first meetings with the women in this group, the distribution of work sites and modes was 42 per cent hostesses in

expatriate bars; 35 per cent dancers in go-go bars; and 23 per cent freelance sex workers attending coffee shops and beer bars. Of regional origins the majority were from the northeast (68 per cent) - the common origin of most women in the foreign-orientated sex trade - with women from the north, east and central regions sharing equal proportions (10 per cent) and a very small number (2 per cent) from Bangkok. It should be noted here that not all women in the sex trade are of peasant origin or lack education. The group, while predominantly of rural origin, includes women who have studied at tertiary institutions but discontinued for various reasons, and many who have lived in the metropolis for extended periods.

***Khai dua* (selling sex): the meaning of prostitution**

Kanprachot chiwit

Why do Thai women become involved in western/foreign-orientated prostitution? To understand the nature of cross-cultural encounters and expectations of customer-cum-lovers, this question is of considerable importance. Much has already been researched and written about rural poverty and the importance of women's role as dutiful daughters in supporting parents and family (Khin 1980; Pasuk 1982; Muecke 1992). These factors are important in understanding key elements of women's identity construction - that is, who they are. But what should be emphasized is the way that conditions in the life courses of these women have framed their decisions to become involved in selling sex to foreign tourists and expatriates in Bangkok and other areas of Thailand.

From information gained from interviews conducted with women across a number of different working contexts, I suggest that poverty itself is not a sufficient condition for women to enter sex work related to foreigners. Women enter the business of selling sex to foreigners with hesitation, with anger, with hate, with resignation and with abandon, never calmly or without fear. A key factor framing many decisions has been emotional crisis in the breakdown of a relationship with a Thai partner. Or at least, such an event has led to a temporary or permanent experiment in changing lifestyle following such an emotional crisis. This may or may not lead to total rejection of Thai males as potential future partners. Walter Meyer, one of the few researchers to seriously comment on this recurrent theme in women's life stories, described the process of entry into prostitution (aside from cases in domestic prostitution, where women have often been forced into such work by traffickers) as 'adjustment to perceived deprivation' in social and economic terms (Meyer 1988: 321). If the information from my research (based on a study of over fifty women) is any guide, then it would appear that a high proportion of workers in tourist-orientated go-go bars and beer bars tend to enter prostitution at an older age than those women entering work in the Thai brothels, and research suggests that their immediate motivations may also be distinctive, in that relationship breakdown is cited as a minor cause of the latter's entry into sex work (Wathini and Guest 1994: 56-7; Pasuk 1982: 14-16).

Women entering freelance prostitution, beer bar and go-go bar work, often have an impulse towards either *kanprachot chiwit* (literally life-spiting, or self-punishment) or a less anger-infused attitude of *seng chiwit* (frustration with life). Such a disposition impels women to gravitate to places of difference and danger, and the well-known night spots and bars of Bangkok where foreigners congregate are well-established destinations. Of over fifty women I studied, 80 per cent had children, and about 80 per cent of this group had broken marriages from a combination of male partner's infidelity, gambling/drinking habits or financial instability. An important factor in the entry of women into tourist-orientated prostitution is that involvement with foreigners represents a new and exciting, even frightening experience, which initially at least, forms part of the aim of *kanprachot chiwit* - the act of spiting one's life. Some women may not carry through their attempted escape into another world - I have spoken to women who have worked in expatriate bars for one or two days and then left for home, unprepared to commit themselves. Others have come to the freelance beer bars with friends or siblings, having argued or broken-up with husbands up-country and decided to find out for themselves what the strange bar scene was like. Such an adventure acts as 'time-out' from domestic affairs, but it does not preclude an experiment with prostitution which may lead to some longer term involvement with a foreigner.

Used on its own, the term *prachot* means sarcasm, but in terms of actions, it can refer to the direction of frustration or anger towards a substitute object (see Klausner 1992: 57-8, who describes it as 'projected vilification'). A common example of such behavior in Thai society is the act of kicking one's dog in lieu of one's boss, if he has displeased you; another is to indirectly punish someone but not clearly reveal the reason; thus the object of resentment may or may not be aware of the meaning of the action. In both examples, direct confrontation is avoided, a state consonant with dominant behavioral values which stress

restraint in revealing strong negative emotions. *Kanprachot chiwit* is also consistent with a recognized form of female anger which is expressed by their running away from husband, family or home at times of conflict (see Phillips 1965: 26). *Kanprachot chiwit* can take the form of self punishment of oneself in lieu of the person who has been the cause of the problem. In the case of women it appears to occur at times of great disappointment, when a familiar world has been shattered or sorely tested. This often comes in the form of betrayal by husbands when they have affairs or take minor wives (mistresses). Some women recalled this strong reaction of anger and disappointment, which impelled them to run away from their familiar milieu and confront a completely different environment. Noi (aged 27, waitress at the Honey Beer Bar), emphasized that in addition to her feeling of rejection, she felt determined to experience a degree of the sexual freedom in which her unfaithful husband had clearly indulged.

Loss of face (*na sia, na daek*) is also an important part of the emotional content of the *kanprachot chiwit* reaction. For example, Phon's world was shattered when her husband, a policeman, brought his mistress home and informed her that this woman would also be living in the house with Phon and her daughter. Already upset by knowledge of her husband's lover, Phon saw this move as a complete insult, and left the home with her child. But she explained her entry into bar work not in terms of punishment towards her husband, but in terms of her need to support her child as well as her disillusion with Thai men. Working in an expatriate bar was the closest approximation to a complete change of life for her. Women can express anger and frustration with a former situation without wanting to pay back former lovers: their common outlook is one of resignation or determination to escape into another world. Tip (Gunslinger Bar, Soi Washington) said that in her case *prachot chiwit* meant not compromising or holding onto hope in her familiar world any more, because of disappointments with her marriage and financial status: '*Chang man, chiwit chan sia laeo, tham hai sia sut-sut loei*' ('To hell with it, life is spoilt anyway, why not spoil it completely!'). Within the general mode of *kanprachot chiwit*, some women never conceal their anger towards their Thai partners: Norn (Umbrella Bar, Soi Cowboy) hit back at her drunken husband when he beat her: to Norn his beating her signaled his breaching of trust and devotion as a partner and she never went back to him. Tip had been frustrated with her marriage (arranged by her father) for a number of years and tried to escape by changing her factory jobs frequently - her husband always followed her, and she often confronted him to allow a divorce. Unhappy with life and in desperation, she followed a friend's suggestion and went to an expatriate bar in Washington Square.

Seng chiwit

Seng chiwit is often mentioned by women as the basis of their entry into prostitution. This expression refers to a range of emotional states, from profound disillusionment with life circumstances to boredom. It is often generated by a combination of financial difficulties and frustration with relationships with families, Thai husbands, or interpersonal conflicts. Thus Nit - a nineteen-year-old Isan woman, formerly a factory worker in Bangkok - expressed her motivation to enter work in a go-go bar in Soi Cowboy in terms of the tedium of her work ("mai mi issara", no freedom) and its low pay, together with the attractions of a lifestyle where she could engage in night life with friends of her own age and purchase the sorts of clothes she had always wanted to wear. She added: 'I had already lost my virginity to a Thai boy, so why not make money from my body with the farang (western foreigners)?' This expresses well the combined motivations of many younger women who enter work as hostesses or dancers in the tourist-orientated red-light districts of Bangkok. Young women's engagement with modernity is expressed through consumption patterns and a more open assertion of sexuality which challenge norms of female respectability. These explorations are also accompanied by involvement in commercialized sexual encounters, among women in Thailand and also throughout the developing world (Murray 1991; Talle 1998). Chim, a go-go dancer from a nearby bar in the same area, volunteered a classification of the motivations of the women working in Soi Cowboy bars (a total of 500 to 700 women): some 10 per cent came for the lifestyle and for fun (*phuying ha sanuk*), 30 per cent came purely to make money, regardless of their personal circumstances (*phuying ha ngun yang dieo*), while 60 per cent were women with a combination of personal and financial motivations (*phuying thi mi banha*, women with problems). She had formed this view after living and working in the area for over two years, and I would suggest that her interpretation is more valid than any estimate that could be produced by academic researchers or NGO workers through formal surveys.

Fear and risk

The world of prostitution is both alien (in terms of direct experience) and yet also familiar to women entering sex work in Bangkok. Isan girls have been brought up in villages with stories of an earlier generation of women who worked in bars and lived with GIs as *mia chao* (rented wives) - this early generation of women may have been morally condemned by villagers, but stories also abound of women enriched by entry into a morally forbidden occupation. While most bar dancers, hostesses and freelance prostitutes share peasant origins, they are rarely strangers to the city as such. Before entering the trade, most worked in the metropolis - many as factory workers, others in low-paid service or labouring occupations (such as domestic service or construction work) the informal sector or small-scale vending. Notably, most women were introduced to sex work directly through friends or with information from acquaintances. Through them, the once unknown territory of the red-light zones of the metropolis - places they had once only heard about - are directly experienced.

Women almost universally begin the work of prostitution with fear and trepidation - the psychological and behavioral adjustments are often traumatic. Not only do these women have to become accustomed to routinely engaging in the most intimate of physical acts with strangers of other races and cultures, but the work demands adjustments in their public persona which go against many of the gendered behavioral norms which have constructed their identity as women. Attracting *farang* customers (whether from a distance across a bar or from the dance floor) requires an explicit presentation of the body and sexuality which is largely alien to their experience. For example, behaviors such as direct eye contact - commonly considered a sign of brazenness and rudeness among Thais - have to be cultivated as a technique to attract attention. Women often do make determined decisions about the types of sex work they enter. Many of those who work as hostesses in expatriate bars or coffee shops shun the idea of dancing and exposing their flesh to strangers. They have been brought up to believe that being brazen (*na dan*) is hateful and Thai modesty and shyness (*khwamai*) are essential female virtues. However, the imperatives which led to their entry often encourage a fatalism and practicality which can overcome deeply felt moral constraints. Phin, a go-go dancer in a Nana Plaza bar related how she sought work in her bar initially as a waitress (*dek serp* - literally girl drink-server) but these positions were all full at the time. She was offered a job as a dancer instead, and she accepted because, as she explained: 'I came this far, so I might as well go all the way'. Phin's work friend, on overhearing our conversation, assertively expressed her own attitude to go-go bar work with the idiomatic Thai expression: '*Dan dai ai ot*' ('I'm shameless and beyond modesty').

The critical facilitator of women's transition into the world of sex work is the subculture formed around women's friendship networks, collective coping strategies and mutual socialization. While women clearly have to cope with adjustments and problems alone, both at the individual psychological level and an interpersonal level with customers, it is critical that we appreciate the collective dimension of prostitution as a woman's world. Women commonly advise newcomers about the explicit and cheeky forms of behavior required of their work. Women literally learn to perform the trade in the company of other women: they learn how to make body contact, to wink seductively, and to speak a smattering of English. More experienced women often introduce their neophyte friends to male customers whom they know and trust as *farang chai di* (foreigner with good heart) or *farang nissai di* (foreigner with good character). If women have been able to meet the manifold challenges of their encounters within the world of selling sex, and if they remain in the work for between six months to a year, they often experience and display a radical change in behavior and outlook. When I met Mem a year after she had first began work as a timid hostess in an expatriate bar she admitted: 'I can't believe how I've changed, I used to be so shy, but now I can say anything and do anything.' The changes in sex workers' presentation of their bodies through make-up, hairstyling and tight and revealing clothing not only signals an adaptation to a standard style for the occupation of prostitution; in fact, these presentations of their bodies are often consonant with the fashions considered 'sexy' or modern (*than samai*) among women of the same generation in the city at large. Younger women in the go-go bars in particular find a shared space for indulgence in a hyperactive youth culture shaped around discos (which they often attend together after work) and common global fashion markers, such as the wearing of tattoos.

One critical condition allowing for women's ease of entry into sex work in Bangkok is the ecological configuration of the city itself and the distance between women's families and their workplaces. The red-light zones are well-defined precincts, and they thus allow women to engage in sex work with anonymity, beyond the disapproving gaze of Thai neighbours and their families. Even when they are walking hand-in-hand with their customers in the streets, they are doing so in a setting where other women are doing the same thing. They work in what might be described as the 'toleration zones' of the city.

Because sex work is almost universally night work, the sexualised nature of initial encounters with customers in public (even in open-air beer bars) is rendered further distant from the daylight world of the metropolis. Even when women move outside the red-light districts in the company of customers (or with boyfriends on outings), they do not encounter explicit disapproval, because of the customary reticence of fellow Thais. A large proportion of women sex workers keep their work a secret from their parents, whether their parents live up-country or in the city. This is made easier by the collusion of friends and siblings in maintaining the fictions that they are working in restaurants or factories in the city. But rural parents' tendency not to press their daughters for details of their work in Bangkok makes it easier for the dissimulation to succeed. This in itself suggests that many parents do in fact have their suspicions, but prefer not to make them explicit, since they often rely on their daughters' cash remittances. Notably, when women take customers to parental villages, they usually present them as boyfriends (*faen*) whom they have met in the city. Women's entry into prostitution is often associated with the experience of shame and moral desperation, but this does not mean that women consider themselves beyond the pale of ordinary Thai life and values. Scholars relying on representations of prostitutes in Thai literature conclude that these women can never be redeemed (such characters often die in tragic circumstance before bearing children); however, studies of popular attitudes to female prostitution indicate quite the opposite (see Harrison 1996; Peracca, Knodel and Chanpen 1998). Keeping their work a secret from families highlights the importance to many women of keeping up appearances and showing respect for parents.

From the late 1980s the danger of HIV/AIDS infection became a major fear among women in the tourist-orientated sex trade. It did not, however, restrict the flow of women into prostitution in its many guises. Rather, more women became conscious of the necessity of insisting on customers using condoms. So too, employers (in go-go bars and other venues) enforced government requirements that women have regular STD and AIDS tests at clinics. One NGO focusing specifically on sex workers (EMPOWER) also played an important role in regularly distributing condoms throughout Pat Pong and other commercial sex districts. But women's understanding of HIV/AIDS and precautions against it remain varied and often simplistic. In evaluating whether or not to sell sex to customers, women often judge men by their appearance and behavior - if men appear dirty and dress poorly, they are judged as a greater risk than men who seem to be clean and neatly dressed (*riap roi*). Some women prefer having fewer, but regular, customers for sexual transactions, assuming that this will minimize risks of infection. Many women confess to having refused sex to a customer who did not agree to using a condom, but other women are less insistent if they are in dire need of money. Among the population of customers themselves, attitudes also vary on the necessity of contraceptive protection, despite increasing publicity advocating its use. When involvements take on a more long-term character, contraceptives are almost invariably dispensed with. Often signifying an increasing trust and intimacy between the woman and her partner (associated with the processes outlined below), it also leads to the additional risks of pregnancy.

Moving between sites and generating arenas

Bangkok bars and hotels, and the major tourist resorts in Thailand, are key sites where stories are played out in relationships between men and women across cultures. These sites, enabled by the technologies and inequalities of advanced capitalism and supported by mass tourism and global flows of capital, have created permanent spaces for such interaction and cross-cultural engagements. But the meetings and interactions which take place cannot be reduced to the over-determination of the conditions imposed by employers (if they are hostesses or dancers) and the venues themselves - these sites, considered collectively, are a dynamically produced 'practiced place', as mentioned above. The red-light district of Sukhumvit, studied in this chapter, is a space defined not only by its physical infrastructure and commercial sex-related businesses, but a place generated by the continued practices of women using the space in their engagement with the varied sites of sex work.

The conditions and settings within which women meet foreigners are not identical. Women themselves will identify submarkets among customers and gravitate towards particular venues. In the process of their work, women may move between a range of sites with customers. The bar itself is only one of these sites. The linkages between these sites are activated by women's creative generation of arenas through their maneuvering with customers. For example, a common movement takes place between the bar and the customers' hotel. As noted in other studies (Cohen 1982, 1993; Askew 1999b), women aim to maximize their economic rewards through a number of maneuvers which include accumulating regular customers or focusing on the acquisition of principal partners. The active generation of arenas is a key sociospatial dynamic underlying this work. Thus the departure area of an airport terminal becomes an arena

through a woman's maneuvering in the construction of a farewell scene with a customer, which may be hilarious or tearful, depending on her 'reading' of the situation and her customer/lover's reactions and dispositions. To describe this as a construction does not necessarily mean that the interaction is entirely staged (as opposed to being authentic). For example, Phim accompanied Hank (with whom she had spent a week) to the airport with a work friend, Meao. On returning to her bar she was forced to admit (in the face of Meao's laughing taunts) that she had been crying, although she at first tried to give the impression to her work friends that she was indifferent. Maneuvering may well depend on knowledge gained through repeated performative engagements across the tourist/leisure sites. The building of knowledge and skills through engagement in the varied sites of encounters with foreign men is of considerable importance in women's maneuvering, since they need to evaluate the dispositions of their clients, balancing these with their own needs. If women become emotionally involved with customers (as many do), they have to weigh up the emotional costs incurred by long distance relationships, where there is the ever-present danger that their lovers may not return to Thailand. Through economic and emotional necessity, women need to frame their encounters with foreign men in such a way as to ensure both commitments and rewards. One experienced bar worker could classify the varied dispositions and wants of foreign men thus: 'Some people holiday. Some people work in Thailand and want girl long time'. Some say, "Want to stay with Thai girl all my life". Some take holiday say "I don't care about the girl, I want to make love" (Walker and Erlich 1992: 82-3).

Different workplaces offer varied possibilities and constraints for women. Thus go-go bars are sites of explicit sexuality where attention is overwhelmingly focused on the women. Here, skills in managing verbal communication in another language are not so important in engaging customer's attention as body language. Smaller expatriate bars are quieter places where conversation skills in English are generally required, unless the western customers can speak Thai. These bars (perhaps more accurately described as expatriate enclaves) are patronized by a core group of men with long-standing friendships. The women who work as hostesses are rarely the sole centre of attention (see Beaumont 1994). Here, the bars' profits are made from selling drinks, not bar fines. Women are rarely pressured by management to go with a customer, and indeed many women make a steady basic income from tips alone, without the need to solicit customers for sex. In this environment they often build, over time, an easy familiarity with patrons as they serve drinks, food, swap jokes and listen to the conversation of the regulars.

In both of these different environments certain relationships develop with customers which are often transformed from pure economic transactions into something else. Thus, men who frequent bars as regular customers (named by women as *Rhaek pracham*) may, with time, become classified as friends (*phuan*), a status which engenders more complex roles, obligations and treatment than first-time customers. These men may function as confidantes (*thi rabai*), buy extra drinks for women, or even pay bar fines so that women can go home if they are ill or menstruating. Those men who have become the regular sexual customers of women in particular bars usually find themselves being treated by their favorite women's workmates as her sole sexual possession, despite these men's own ultimate intentions. This, of course, might be regarded more as an efficient way to allocate customers and minimize competition in a collective working environment, than an indication of client-sex worker bonding in the bar environment. Notably, however, women express this system in terms which combine their work with other key issues of pride and reputation among workmates within the bar. Despite the bar-owners' principal concern with maintaining profits regardless of customers' preferences or promiscuity, the women themselves treat men who breach their tacit 'one-customer-one-girl' rule with disdain.

The ability of a woman to capture a customer's attention and engage his interests depends on a range of factors which include not only her own appearance, but also the customer's own preferences, her language abilities, and her capacity to read the situation as it develops. From regular encounters in a bar there is often a phase in relationships between bar workers and their clients/lovers when the spatial span of the relationship moves beyond the bar venue itself to other leisure/tourist sites. It may extend to outings to movie theatres, restaurants, shopping and other excursions. In many cases bar women will stay for the duration of their 'boyfriend's' holiday in his hotel. These sites are arenas of women's presentation of self (a consciously-constructed role), and actively develop the bonds (whether sexual, emotional or both) between them and their clients." The written correspondence of foreign men with their Thai girlfriends highlights the significance of these sites in the pattern of the sexual/emotional encounter: men who have returned home often envision the relationship as an ensemble of key memories and events (see Cohen 1982; Walker and Erlich 1992). Such events are generated through the interactive moments embodied in arenas. Arenas are generated on beaches during holidays, in hotel rooms, restaurants, streets, and in departure and arrival

points in airports. The holiday - a trip to a resort or popular destinations in the provinces - is a standard expectation of short-term tourists and bar women alike. Western men are charmed by the prospect of extended holidays with the Thai women they meet. On the woman's part, from a purely mercenary viewpoint, an extended holiday allows her a predictable flow of income in an unstable economic world. The following example helps to highlight the ways that an involvement can develop unexpectedly from a casual transaction to a friendship to a romance. George, an electrical contractor from Canada, a man with considerable experience of the bar scene in Bangkok, met Pun, a woman newly arrived at an expatriate bar in Washington Square as a hostess. George, who was suffering the after-effects of a difficult divorce, was not in search of a romantic involvement with a bar-worker. His friend Rick, an expatriate of long standing, introduced him to Pun because he thought George might like the company of a polite and well-spoken Thai woman. For her part, Pun had left her home in Nakhon Sri Thammarat after the death of her husband and subsequent disputes with his family over an inheritance. What began as a companionable exchange of information on their first meeting soon developed further into a friendship based on mutual sympathy (George could speak Thai, Pun spoke no English). First restricted to the bar, they began meeting at restaurants and finally in George's hotel room, where they spent most of the time quietly watching television and eating snacks. For his part, one might suggest that George was disguising an essentially economic transaction by clothing it with the appearance of a friendship. For her part, Pun confessed to me that she was initially simply acting in the hostess role and 'taking care of a customer' (*du lae khaek*). But over the space of a month, with constant meetings and outings, this relationship took on the character of a romance, with both parties confessing to feelings of intimacy. The bar management expected Pun to do her job - which meant entertaining customers and sleeping with them if requested: she did this without telling George, who understood in any case. Pun's expression of intimacy and discrimination was not in technically staying sexually faithful, but in allowing George to have sex with her without using a condom (this is a common signifier of trust and intimacy among sex workers, despite the obvious risks), George never visited Pun's home, but he took Pun to meet many of his expatriate *farang* friends in Bangkok. The intimacy was reinforced when Pun accompanied George to the airport on his departure. Although George had been paying Pun's bar fines, he has not been required to pay Pun on each of her encounters. Rather, he paid her a lump sum of money at the time of his departure. To Pun, this represented an acceptable statement of commitment on the part of her *faen*, and it was recognized as such by her coworkers in the bar.

An extension and variation on the holiday experience for the foreign male is a visit to his girlfriend's village or home to meet her parents. This is an arena of considerable importance because it will often have a major impact on him. It will often accelerate his engagement in the woman's life, through friendship with her family, and will draw him into a web of financial/moral obligations which are calculated to extend the relationship with the woman. For the women, this return to the village also articulates her small-scale movements within the red-light zone with her wider spatial practice of oscillation between city and country and significant fields of valued cultural capital, providing the opportunity to generate a key arena of self-presentation for parents and family.

In terms of women's presentation of self, the bar is a site of arenas generated not only for clients, but for peers, who are one of the three key reference groups (or spheres) towards which women fashion identity. Just as most women enter the various types of prostitution on the advice and suggestions of women friends, so too their work of meeting and relating to foreign men takes place in the presence of other women. Work companions help to establish a collective framework to reinforce confidence and in certain cases resistance. For example, to ease their own boredom on occasions, when supervisors are not watching, go-go dancers in Soi Cowboy bars will laughingly parody the lesbian sex shows famous in Patpong. Such arenas mock the entire enterprise of sex work in a shared moment of hilarity among working peers. Particularly in the go-go bars, women form a strong peer group which reinforces the culture of prostitution by celebrating their bodies and sensuality. In an important contribution to the literature on sex worker-client encounters and identity-construction, Lisa Law has proposed that dancing bars in the Cebu (Philippines) operate as a third space for women: that is, they are a space beyond the constructed dualisms of oppressor/victim which so much of the literature and NGO discourse imputes to the sex worker-client encounter (Law 1997b: 114-15).

Arenas, as mentioned above, are generated not only through the maneuverings made necessary in the pursuit of income from sex work. They are generated in periodic encounters with family and siblings in the frequent oscillation between the 'place' of work (the red-light district) and the 'place' of the village, both of which represent the key fields of cultural capital towards which women strategize. The enactment of valued and expected roles (of committed mother to children and loyal daughter to parents) takes place in

social encounters which punctuate women's movements. Assisting families at times of emergency, attending important religious rituals (funerals, new year celebrations, ordination of brothers into the monkhood) all enact important elements of selfhood in the network of relations and obligations which comprise the place of the household and its village setting.

Different arenas may be played out simultaneously. This is seen in the following example of Geoff's trip to Et's home in Chiang Mai Province. Et, a freelance bar worker, had known Geoff (an expatriate American English teacher) as a regular customer for several months. Lacking enough money to return home to Chiang Mai in sufficient style during the important Khao Phansa festival period, she invited him to go to her village. In paying for the beer and alcohol, as well as much of the food consumed during the family's domestic entertainment, Geoff served the purpose of supporting Et's material and social role as eldest daughter in the family. In addition, the visit also served to consolidate the relationship between them, even though this didn't appear to be Et's original intention. Geoff got to know members of Et's family, participated in celebrations and rituals, and tried his hand at rice planting. Et pleased her parents and younger sisters' by bringing money (Geoff's) to help with their school fees and presenting a man who appeared to be a good candidate for a permanent partner and patron, at least in the eyes of her parents. Following their return to Bangkok, Et moved into Geoff's apartment. Knowing the members of the family, Geoff continued to participate in supporting the family's status in their community, and Et stopped working.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital comprises status markers in those broad domains of values called 'fields'. While these domains transcend particular places of engagement, the cultural capital (converted from economic gain) assumes value precisely because it is recognized as such by the key groups in women's lives who mediate these fields of value. There are at least three broad and overlapping spheres where women channel the material resources of their work (and the relationships which often ensue) into cultural capital (status resources). One sphere centers on parents and family and is manifested in material contributions to efforts at house building, economic projects, and various consumer goods or material needs (paying off debts, school fees of siblings, motor vehicles, etc.). The sphere of peers relates to those goods and resources that help affirm her identity to networks of friends in the workplace and elsewhere in the city. Cultural capital in this sphere comprises a woman's status as a girlfriend being taken care of and supported by a foreign boyfriend (thus not having to engage in sex work, temporarily or permanently), and in many cases a 'modern woman' of style - the status markers supporting this identity include clothes, jewellery, fees for language lessons and other projects such as holidays. Such status markers may be accumulated through monogamous attachments or more casual engagements with a multitude of customers. However, the generally accepted preference is that women find a single man. The achievement of visible status through material possessions and emotional security (expressed in the ways that women often change their public personas from promiscuous and hedonistic bar dancers to faithful wives - *mia*) encourages both admiration and jealousy in women's workplaces. The sphere of the lover is perhaps more variable, since it centers on the ways individual women relate to their partners in daily life and in terms of emotional affirmation.

The relationships between foreign males and Thai prostitutes involve both pecuniary and emotional dimensions because of the cultural models employed by the women and the idioms they adopt in the relationship. Long-term relationships, whether of cohabitation or of serial visiting and sojourn in Thailand on the part of foreign men, arise in part from them adopting a patron role in a patron-client relationship not necessarily of their own making. Anthropologists have argued that reciprocity of protector and loyal client is a predominant indigenous model in Thai relations (Hanks 1975). But, just as importantly, it is a fundamental dimension of male-female relations in marriage and partnerships in Thai society, especially peasant society (Hanks 1962: 1257). In this understanding of the meaning and value of the compact, the reciprocal exchange of care and welfare needs both parties to comply (Phillips 1965: 32-3). 'Love' is a term played with in the bars and beds of Bangkok, but ultimately as an explanation of the bonds and compacts in partnerships as they evolve among Thai women and western men, love is a complex of exchanges (Cohen 1987). When commercialized sexual encounters between customers and bar women become personalized and ongoing, the understanding of exchange itself becomes more generalized, and not tied to payment for specific sex acts. To women, material well-being is a symbol of a lover's regard - of conferring face (*na*) and honor (*kiat*). The reciprocity which is negotiated in ongoing relations entangles men in a constant effort to prove the value (*khun kha*) of their partners through assisting various projects, explicit or implicit, of women's self-fashioning.

The meaning of relationships between farang men and Thai women, the translation of material into emotional bonds, is best seen by appreciating the signifying importance of gold, and more specifically, gold chains. In Thai society the possession and display of gold ornaments and chains in particular is of crucial significance. Gold betokens assets and solidity/security - in other words, it gives the wearer face (*na*). In strictly practical terms gold can be cashed or pawned in times of need. Beyond social status and encashment potentiality, gold chains are significant in symbolizing key relationships and compacts. Unlike the customary cash payment made to a bride's parents, the gold given by a woman's betrothed stays in her possession. Among sweethearts, even prior to marriage, the giving of a gold chain signifies the commitment and strength of regard of the lover. Similarly, *farang* suitors are expected to at some stage show the depth of their regard by giving gold chains.

While *farang* men themselves have no role in the production of the meaning of gold as a status marker, they are involved in its symbolic economy. We see more clearly the ways that gold serves emotional and transactional uses in the following example of Chai's gold chains. When Chai broke up with her American boyfriend the special meaning she attached to her gold chain as a gift/bond of love and commitment was broken. She had no regrets in selling the expensive chain to pay for her mother's hospital fees. But her mother (living in Prachinburi province) did not know that she had broken up with her *farang* lover (who had visited the family home), and on Chai's visit to the hospital she asked where her chain had gone. This affected Chai deeply, because, as she said: 'I didn't want my mother to know that things were starting to get difficult for me financially, or that something had gone wrong'. The gold chain symbolized her important relationship with the American, it showed her family that she had some material capacity - particularly significant because of her experience of financial dependence on her family after her Thai husband had deserted her. She had resolved never again to express such dependence and moral vulnerability in the face of her family. Thus when a new customer, Brian, got to know Chai a little better, he was concerned to see Chai crying, and learned that it was about the matter of the chain. As an expression of his increasing affection, Brian bought Chai a new gold chain, symbolically cementing their relationship as special, and giving Chai the confidence to face her parents at an important village funeral which she was expected to attend. The story and the life of the chain does not end here. Brian returned to Hong Kong and his wife, but kept contact with Chai and promised to send her money regularly. Within a few months Chai was facing financial problems, having left the Comanche go-go bar after Brian had left Thailand. With financial commitments mounting (support for her daughter and doctors bills) she was compelled to pawn her new chain to raise cash, but she did not sell it, as she had the American's gold chain. She asked Brian to send more money, because she wanted to redeem the gold chain. Rather than selling the chain, she wanted to keep it to affirm the compact with Brian. This example shows how the materiality of the gold chain became transmuted into a status marker in the domestic arena for Chai, and how its additional value as an emotional marker of her compact with her *faen* was affirmed in her reluctance to sell it for cash. At the same time, Brian's sending of some cash to help her redeem this chain affirmed his importance to her as a lover with a stake in her life. He was a person to be relied upon (*tin pung*). There are certainly many cases where women have sold their gold with no compunction whatever, but they were cases where no compact had been made. Gold, perhaps a quintessential item of congealed labor value for sex workers (after Marx), can also be transformed into another link in the entangled material-emotional compacts of Thai and *farang*. Western customers-cum-boyfriends become sources for a wide range of status-conferring commodities whereby women can display a modern, 'sexy' identity. While relatively few women in the sex trade may achieve long-lasting material security through the economic rewards of their work, those that do succeed, even temporarily, visibly subvert the moral order of the urban Thai middle class by virtue of attaining the cultural capital of modernity through engaging in stigmatized work.

Oscillating through fields

Oscillation - the irregular movement between urban and rural places and the simultaneous engagement in key fields of cultural capital - is a pattern generated both by the nature of sex work and (more importantly) the necessities of women's multiple commitments which drive their strategies. Very few women regard their bar work as long-term, this derives from their motive for entry, their own self-perception, and other obligations. In fact, a large number of women come to the bars only when short of money or when there is free time. For some rural women such free time comes when the harvest is over up-country. For others, need and opportunity dictate their movement into and out of the work. The work experience is temporary even among most of the women who come to the go-go bars and coffee shops, expatriate bars and night clubs and work for longer periods in the red-light zone. Work in a go-go bar may

involve a short spell of six months or a longer period of two to four years, depending on circumstances. Of the group of women studied in this research, 45 per cent had worked for a year or less, 29 per cent for two to three years, and 26 per cent between three and seven years.

Women return to the provinces for varying periods to find work near their homes and children. Many return to work in Bangkok after spells of village sojourn, citing boredom or lack of money as key factors. Others never return to Bangkok, having given up on the prospect of earning much money, or having made enough money to buy land or invest in a small business. Others marry foreigners and disappear from the bar scene altogether. Of the fifty women studied here, ten married foreign customers during the period of my research (1994-8), while another ten left sex work to cohabit with foreign expatriate boyfriends or to be permanently supported by tourists who had returned to their own countries pending marriage arrangements. Of the others, most admitted to having had at least one intense emotional involvement with a customer, during which time they had been supported financially.

Women encounter foreign men in the context of experiencing Bangkok and new places in their lives, Erik Cohen has argued that the dominant form of prostitution engaged in by Thai women with foreign men should be described as open-ended, since it is not acknowledged as a full time occupation by the women (he argues that such prostitution is 'incompletely professionalized') and it generally entails more than just an exchange of sex for cash (Cohen 1993: 159-61). Understanding such patterns as practiced strategies of self-recovery is important. Such self-recovery requires transgression of normative cultural sanctions (explicit use of the body as sexual instrument, open sexuality and promiscuity) and necessitates movement between specialized sites of the sex-industry infrastructure and public areas of the city. Regardless of the variable length of time invested in this work, these women's encounter with prostitution in Bangkok can be interpreted from a life-course perspective as an experiment in life style change stemming largely from personal crises and disappointments. Moreover it is a conscious choice to defy normative constraints on their behavior as women in pursuit of cultural capital. It is part of the broader story of the negotiation of meaning in a time of major impacts on women's roles and status from wide-ranging social and economic change (Richter 1992; Yot 1992). However, we should not impute to their movements the goal of eventually restoring a village mode of existence once destroyed. These women are not of the generation which saw the city as hostile and threatening, many have engaged in urban work prior to entry into prostitution. The city itself is part of a broader field of modernity and style of life in which women actively participate and fashion their identities.

Conclusion

The encounters between foreign men and Thai women sex workers can be characterized by the complementary impulses of the males' desire for radical simplicity and the woman's experimentation leading to normalization of her life (in terms of income, role and status). Women's lived narratives intersect with those of foreign men and help to shape the nature of key sites of cross-cultural encounter in Bangkok. Sex workers meet foreign men and manage these encounters in the micro-settings of beer bars, go-go bars, karaoke clubs and coffee shops where the consumption and commodification of women's bodies is an integral element in the ecology of interaction. While the victimhood of women has been the dominant motif in the literature on sex tourism (for exceptions see Law 1997a and Odzer 1994), I have argued here that women, at the level of their own life courses, in their work environments and with their customers, are agents, not victims, despite their position in a socio-economic formation which disadvantages them. Through their sociospatial practices across the many sites of encounters with foreign men - the bars, resorts, hotels and streets - women generate the arenas which help shape the meaning and benefits of transactions, material and emotional.

With respect to the stereotyping of Bangkok - and of Thailand generally - as a sexual playground for foreign men, we need to acknowledge the global nature of the sex trade. In fact, there are more Thai sex workers working in Japan and European cities (such as Amsterdam) than in the tourist zones of Bangkok (Watanabe 1998). Until recently, there has been far more attention given to the issue of global trafficking than the equally significant reality that Thai women sex workers are intensely entrepreneurial, and voluntarily work offshore in considerable numbers (Murray 1998; Platt 2001). Nonetheless Bangkok remains a key space in the economy of foreign expatriate and tourist pleasure. Bangkok has grown as a world city, with its role founded on the New Industrial Division of Labor and, arguably, the 'New International Sexual Division of Labor' - the latter term arguably incorporating an acknowledgement of its female-dominated industrial labor force as well as its tourist-orientated sex workers (see, e.g. Ong 1985; Mills 1999). In terms of its role in sex-orientated tourism, Bangkok can be portrayed as both a pleasure

space for foreign men and a working space for Thai women sex workers. This space (actually a complex of sites and zones within the metropolis) is not only a product of unequal economic development and dependency, but also of cross-cultural interactions and fantasy. In an important essay on theorizing local-global interactions in world cities, Robert Beauregard (1995: 242) asks the question 'what if the global is constituted by the local?' Here I have argued that the Bangkok of the tourist and foreign (expatriate) male is simultaneously a space of women's (most of them rural women) strategizing - it is not simply a pleasure space constructed by foreign male desire. From the perspective suggested here - that of women's narratives, practices and identities - 'Bangkok' is a series of sites where women engage strategies to entangle their customers in relationships and transform them into lovers with obligations towards a range of status-enhancing ends.