

## CHAPTER 7



### INTERVIEWEES' PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AND THE FACTORS INVOLVED

The interview data of these farang women married to Thai men has been applied to the questions for analyses in this thesis, to determine the factors that have influenced these women's relationships and any changes in Thai society that may have affected them. As suggested throughout this thesis, Thailand's socio-economic development and cultural change are believed to have been major influences on the women's ability to adapt to their external socio-economic environment. How they perceive such changes will be shown below. Because these women have 'survived' the challenges that destroyed many other Thai-farang marriage relationships, the interviewees were asked direct questions to reveal the women's own perceptions of Thailand's development process. They were also asked to describe the factors which they believe facilitated their 'success'. In addition, the women were asked if they thought their relationships with their husbands and with Thai society would be different if they shared the same culture (ie the women were Thai, or their husbands' were farang), to determine how they perceive the influence of cultural differences on their relationships. Finally, the women were asked if they would be prepared to 'do it all again', marry their Thai husbands and come to live in Thailand, and what advice they have for other women considering such a step.

## Physical and Social Changes in Thailand.

Thailand's rapid economic development of the past few decades has set the pace for enormous physical and social change throughout the country, the effects of which are most concentrated and obvious in the capital. Tracy has been living in Bangkok for over 20 years and noted that whenever she goes home to America the change is never as obvious there as it is in Thailand. However, while the older-generation women, by the fact that they have been living in Thailand for longer, have seen more changes than the new-comers, there is no distinct age-generational difference to be found in the way in which these women perceive Thailand's physical, or social changes.

### Physical Changes

The most obvious changes are the physical ones, as Alison says,

The buildings are much bigger and more plentiful, traffic is even worse, pollution is worse - consumer products - there's much more variety and its more westernized - you can go shopping in Central Chitlom and pretend you're not in Thailand!

Though changes in infrastructure are undisputable, the women tend to see these changes as both good and bad. As Margaret, a long-timer, explains:

In the early days transportation was very difficult, street cars or buses were less frequent and more difficult than today. Today

there is more transport, but too much and it never goes anywhere!

However, modern shopping facilities have made life easier and she has learnt how to get around the traffic problems,

I try to let errands accumulate, its too much hassle to go out for every individual item, but better than in the old days, if you needed to buy 5 different items then you had to take a bus or streetcar and go to 5 different places!

Although most women of all ages appreciate the physical amenities, such as supermarkets and communications, they also think that Thailand is going from one extreme of nothing, to another of too much! Too many buildings, and too much traffic!

In fact, many women were inclined to focus on what they perceive to be the 'bad' aspects of change, lamenting the 'western' influence on Thai development, which may have been a disappointment to their underlying romantic notions of an 'exotic' Bangkok. Pat, a long-timer says that Thailand, "could have developed without so much of the Western model - now its too hectic and chaotic, not the best way." And Bridget, though a new-comer believes that Thai,

friendliness is fast disappearing - [Bangkok is] too big too urban. Old Thailand was much more pleasant to live in - I could get around and see people - there was time to get to know people.

Indeed, hand in hand with the physical modernisation, most woman see a social decline.

### Social Changes

Many women commented on the prevailing materialism and selfishness of Thai (Bangkok) society which they see to be a result of economic development. Margaret has been living in Thailand over 40 years and says,

I see a distinct degradation of a lot of good in Thai culture and behaviour, there's pushing, shoving, competing, greed. When people were laid back, the greed just wasn't there - that's a colossal generalization, of course there were greedy people but not on the same scales and they were not acceptable to the bulk of the people who were not greedy.

Now Margaret, among others, believes that Thais are confusing their culture, and commented on the possible consequences of such change,

It's sad to see the wai is disappearing, shaking hands even with other Thai. Occasionally I've seen a Thai who doesn't know about the proper behaviour in certain situations and that's sad because before, proper behaviour was not something that was constraining but everything fitted together. What they've done is taken this piece out and now nothing fits - you just can't do that with a society and those holes are going to be replaced with completely incongruous elements that will rock the whole boat and I'd hate to see that. I'd hate to think they're going to become another grasping, greedy, racing, pushing, shoving society, there are enough of them (in the world) already. I wish it were possible for the powers that be to even out the economic situation, but they're not evening it

out at all and people are struggling to keep ahead and not be pushed out.

Thus, although Thais have long prided themselves on their ability to 'pick and choose' aspects from other cultures and make them their own, Margaret believes that Thais are now blindly copying ideas and practices from the West without careful consideration of the social consequences. For example,

Old people are being pushed out of their children's homes and put into very inferior public homes and just left there. They've been like that in the States for a long time but that fits in with the culture because the parents don't usually want to live with the children, they want to be independent, they know there's going to be trouble if they live with the children, but this is another hole that has been taken out of Thai society.

However, Bridget thinks, the term Western influence is overdone. In many cases it's just a convenient label to place blame. They don't have to accept Western technology but Thai people wanted it. They've changed because of their desires not because of western influence. I mean they take the technology but ignore the social factors behind it. If anything, I want to be like 'them', when they want to be like 'us'!

#### Thai-farang relationships

A few women also commented on the change of attitude of Thais towards foreigners, again, with mixed

interpretations. Some perceived a growing amount of resentment and hostility towards farang and themselves; while others were relieved that they can now escape the social spotlight and unwanted attention. Sharon has been living in Thailand nearly 15 years and noted that,

Thai people are less friendly to farang than they used to be - the general people - the lower class like shop keepers, bus conductors. Before, I think there were not so many tourists, not so much western influence, so when they came across it they were much more open and friendly to it. I've noticed a lot more aggression from people on the street - that sort of thing.

Margaret, a long-timer, also noticed,

a more unfocused resentment towards foreigners now than I ever did before - its increasing in Bangkok, being glared at for no reason. I was stared at before, innocent curiosity, but I feel a lot of it now is resentment just because I'm a foreigner.

However, this is not seen as completely negative for Margaret continued,

I think they're a lot less idealistic about foreigners than they used to be - I'm glad to see some of the critical remarks because that just goes to show that they are beginning to see them (foreigners) for what they are, but that would be more on business, government interface than just going past people on the street.

In fact, Alice has been living in Thailand for over 30 years and definitely sees this change in attitude towards farang in a positive light. She said that when she first came,

people used to blindly look to the West for everything, I felt looked-up to simply because I

was western. Now people have developed their own sense of pride in their city, their country, their culture. (They) have seen so many foreigners now that I'm not something/someone they need to know about anymore.

And she feels much happier and more comfortable this way!

#### Change in the Social Position of Thai Women

To continue on a positive note, one area in which age-generational perceptions were apparent was in the social position of Thai women. Most of the older-generation believe that the social status of Thai women has improved with good consequences for themselves. Catherine and Liza both commented on the increased independence of Thai women. They have seen the effects of increased education and economic independence upon a Thai woman's ability to take more control of her own life than before. Though many new-comers still believe that Thai women are not very independent, the older-generation compare the situation with when they first came. At that time a Thai women's place was definitely in the home, divorce was difficult and economically unwise as the women still depended on their husbands for financial support. Thus with few options and low awareness, many tolerated unsatisfactory relationships. The repercussions on farang women in similar situations were not helpful at the time. It was equally difficult for such women to obtain divorces from their husbands on any grounds, or keep the children if a divorce was granted. Those that did separate often remained in Thailand to be near their children and faced the social pressure of not only being a farang, but an even greater burden of being a divorced farang. Despite recent changes in the law which allow

more grounds for divorce, in the case of adultery, the cards are still stacked in favour of the husband who can easily divorce his wife for adultery whereas a wife must prove that her husband has publicly presented another woman as his wife before a divorce will be granted. Even so, more and more Thai women are opting for divorce rather than stay in marital misery. Catherine, who herself is divorced said that such change in the position of Thai women, slow though it may be has made it somewhat easier for farang women to separate and divorce, and live independent lives in Thailand. However, Catherine says that Thailand is still a man's world with a long way to go before the situation really changes, and reaches all Thai women in every level of society. Nonetheless, she noted the fact that Thai women are beginning to get more respect and opportunities and more importantly, she believes they are beginning to have more say in their own lives.

#### Social Outlets

Margaret, a long-timer, noted that nowadays there are many more farang living in Thailand and thus many more social outlets available to farang women than there were when she arrived 40 years ago. In addition, as friends were hard to find when she first came to live in Thailand, the need for someone to confide in was often unfulfilled and there was nowhere or no one else to turn to for help.

One thing that is available to foreign women now that never was is counselling at CSB which has counselling even if you can not afford it. Before that there were only those of us who had been around longer, and we weren't all that



helpful - it's taken me 36 years to figure out some of the elements that were operating that I wasn't aware of at the time ... we weren't that helpful because we didn't know ourselves.

None of the women interviewed said they had personally sought this counselling, which may well be due to the fact that they have either built social networks or already learned to cope in other ways. Many other facilities are available to farang women, most notably social groups such as the Women Across Cultures, (which was only set-up by CSB 20 years ago) as well as school and church networks, and other social clubs which have sprung-up over the past two decades. Therefore, with a wider choice of social outlets now available to the women, perhaps the need for counselling is no longer as great as it may have been in the past when unfortunately it was not available.

#### Perceptions of Success

Though some age-generational differences were found in the way the women perceived the factors that influenced their lives and relationships, and their ability to adjust to their new environment, most women believe that having a partnership with their husbands has been the most influential factor to their success. Other women gave various reasons for their success ranging from knowing their husband for a long time before coming to Thailand to meeting him here; as well as good communication, children, common interests, independence and friends.

### Partnership with their Husbands

Half of the long-timers saw their relationships in terms of teamwork and partnership. Karen says the reason her marriage, "has lasted is that neither of us are the kind to give up easy on each other - we believe we're worth hanging on to." And Pat believes that she and her husband are a good balance and complement each other in many ways. "He's an old fuddy-duddy and I'm hyperactive!"

In comparison, two-thirds of the new-comers perceive their success as a result of partnership and mutual understanding. Teresa says that she and her husband are committed to, and trust each other completely and both want what is best for the other. Others, like Mandy, say that they have a solid friendship with their husbands and have helped each other adjust to the external pressures of living here. Sharon, a new-comer, admits that she, "cannot deny that thoughts of packing and returning home crossed my mind, but my fear of failure was greater so I perservered." But she continues that, "my ability to adapt to *mai pen rai* <sup>\*</sup> and the fact that my husband and I are very compatible attributed to my still being in Thailand/this marriage."

All the women above perceived their success to be due to a joint effort with their husbands and believe that both their own, and their husbands attitudes contribute to their successful relationships.

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\* A common Thai phrase covering many situations and generally translated as 'never mind'.

### Individual Attributes

In contrast, a few women from each generation felt it was their own individual personalities and attitudes that made their relationships work. Some of the older generation women said their Victorian up-bringsings and sense of the 'right thing' allowed them to suffer difficulties and tolerate their husbands for as long as was possible. Of the new-comers Diane says, "I've matured a lot and learnt to accept more - you become more broadminded living here - you have to be positive and I've always been quite independent." And Helen, also a new-comer, says that as she did not expect too much she has had few disappointments.

### Knowing Husband a Long Time before Coming to Thailand

Sally and her husband had known each other for over 15 years before coming to Thailand which she says allowed them to develop a strong friendship that helps them get through any problems here together. Indeed, Christine believes that had she and her husband come to live in Thailand straight after marriage, their relationship would not have survived. She believes that having been married and living in America for 11 years before coming to Thailand gave them time to establish a close understanding of each other and the determination not to give up.

### Meeting Husband in Thailand

On the other hand, Sarah says that meeting her husband in his own environment was important for her as she could see how 'he really was'.

### Communication

Fran believes that regardless of where you meet, communication is the key and attributes their, "good relationship to good communication and the ability to pick and choose the best of each culture and leave the rest."

### Children

Heather said her marriage had "been hard work, but the children bind you closer and I would do it again."

### Common Interests

Alison says that she and her husband, complement each other in so many ways - we have a string of common interests that we pursued together which really cemented our relationship and gave us lots of things to do together and talk about and to discover together.. and we had our own, still have, a sort of adventure in discovering that.

### Independence

In contrast, one reason Tracy thinks she and her husband have stayed together and are happy is because they are both very independent and give each other a lot of 'space'.

### Friends

However, Margaret says her strength came from the fact that she was lucky to have a good support system from family and friends which helped her through the more difficult times in her relationship.

That the majority of the women perceive their success to be due to partnership and teamwork with their husbands seems to suggest that a strong relationship is capable of overcoming external challenges. But Betty believes that whether they benefit from teamwork, individual attitude, children or any number of combinations of the above factors, women like her, "still face the same problems any married couple face in a marriage even though we look different." As Maureen points out,

Marriage can be difficult enough without introducing culture differences in the picture, particularly when the language, customs and even the food are as diverse as they are in our two cultures.

What difference does culture make in these relationships?

### The Effects of Cultural Differences

Karen suggests that, "Marriage is difficult in any culture but with two cultures it takes constant working at and understanding, trying and giving!" When any two people of the same culture get married, personality adjustments have to be made. But in mixed-marriages when the couple go to live in another country, one spouse has to adjust not only to personal differences but also to external cultural differences. A combination of both these adjustments can make the marriage more precarious than those between partners of the same culture. If the newly-weds can accommodate each other, the cultural differences may often remain superficial and not be so distressing, but if there are underlying difficulties in a relationship, the cultural differences may be exasperated or used as a focus of blame for inner failings.

However, Helen believes too many women blame Thai culture for their problems and advises against this.

I think you have to decide what are the things that annoy you and you have to decide whether they're part of his personality per se or his culture before you start attacking him because of his culture, 'Oh you're Thai you don't understand....' - but then again how much of a personality is culture is difficult to define.

'Culture' is a broad term which for the purpose of this question covers patterns of behaviour, attitudes and expectations which are common to a particular society. What effects does culture have upon the individuals concerned in Thai-farang marriages, not only on the farang woman coming to Thailand, but with the man she

marries, his family and the society in which she lives. For many women culture does not appear to be an issue. However, there are many for whom cultural difference is a very real issue and while some perceive cultural differences to have a positive effect on their relationship, others see it as a negative factor in their relationships, either with their husband, their inlaws, or Thai society in general. Age-generational differences to be found suggest that culture is indeed less of an issue for the new-comers, which perhaps is a result of Thai social change and increased familiarity and interaction between the two cultures.

While a third of both generations saw cultural differences as a non-issue, half of the older-generation believed culture had had a negative effect on their relationships with their husbands. In comparison over half of the new-comers said there would be a difference if they shared the same culture with their husbands, but less than a sixth believed the change would be for the better. In fact, while a quarter of the new-comers do believe that cultural differences affect their relationships with the extended family, over a quarter of also believe that cultural differences serve to enrich their relationships with their husbands.

#### Culture a Non-Issue

A third of both the older generation and new-comers said there would be no difference at all in their relationships if their cultures were the same. Alice says, "Its the person not the culture - I don't know if it would make a difference, culture has never been an issue with us." Pat also believes that, "its a question

of personal adjustment in a marriage - not cultural.”

And as Diane believes,

It doesn't matter if you're cross-cultural or of the same culture, it doesn't matter - even in your own country, some guy may grow-up in a different way and you say something in a different dialect and you still have to know how they put things. In your own culture or society people are different, but they don't realize it. You just have to accept people for what they are.

Sharon said,

Being farang or Asian is not an issue, it's not the colour of his skin, or the colour of his hair, it's the whole person, the way they act, their ideals and things like that you know ... I think those sort of things are important.

#### Culture a Negative Factor - Husbands

However, half of the older-generation thought culture had made their relationships difficult and that if they shared the same culture as their husbands there would be a positive difference in their relationship. Wendy says that, “Life wouldn't have been so hard,” while for Margaret, she and her husband, “Would not have had years of misunderstandings.”

In comparison, less than a sixth of the new-comers said their relationship with their husbands would be better. In terms of communication, Jane said that if she and her husband shared the same culture they, “would communicate.” And Helen agreed that communication with her husband might be better as they would probably share similar, “frames of reference”.



### Culture a Negative Factor - In-Laws

None of the remaining older-generation mentioned the effects of sharing the same culture would have had on their relationships with the in-laws, which may reflect that while many no longer live with their in-laws, those that once may have had problems have learnt to accept them, or that it is no longer an immediate issue for them. That these women are the 'survivors' may also correspond with the suggestion that other women who have already left Thailand may have had cultural problems with their in-laws.

However, a quarter of the new-comers, said if they shared the same culture then there would be no problems related to their husband's family. Sally believes that if she shared her husband's culture, "I would understand and tolerate his family involvement!" While in comparison Sharon believes that, "His family would accept me."

### Culture a Positive Factor - Husbands

However, a quarter of the new-comers believe culture has a positive influence on their relationships and that without the cultural differences their relationships would not be so good. After all, Vanessa says that it is the differences in culture that make her marriage interesting. She and her husband like the fact that they are different and like to find out what makes the other tick. She says that trying to understand each other makes their relationship richer. Fran also believes that, "Life would not be as interesting and challenging if we were from the same background." June

says that if she and her husband shared the same culture there would; "generally (be) no difference - but I like our cultural differences - it's interesting what arises and very educational." Alison agrees,

I learn a lot from him and from a broader vision that an Australian PLUS Thai perspective gives. I like the opportunities provided by mixed marriage.... I've learnt a lot more than I've had problems, and I've really enjoyed having those different perceptions opened up.

While women perceive the effects of culture in different ways, how many of these women would be prepared to take the risk again?

#### Those Who Would do it Again

As previously mentioned, these women are the exceptions, the success stories and whatever mechanisms they believe helped them to survive, how many say they would go through it all again? A few older-generation women were not sure if they would take the risk again. Catherine said she would only do it again, "if I didn't know what I know now!" And Janet admitted that, "Knowing what I know now, probably not - or I would try to find someone who could make life more comfortable for me so I wouldn't have had such a hard time [financially]." In fact, only half of the long-timers compared to all but one of the new-comers said they would marry their Thai husbands and come to live in Thailand again. And, Maureen said she, "wouldn't have it any other way!"

Although the new-comers were generally more positive and enthusiastic in their responses this contrast

reflects the general 'age-generational' difference of satisfaction with their relationships. However, although most women said they would do it again, some with the benefit of hindsight had thought of preconditions. Sharon claims,

I wouldn't hesitate to do it again but I might put some provisos up such as, not living with our in-laws right from the beginning - I think that would have made it a lot easier. .. I'd probably speak English with my children and I wouldn't have *cot tabian*\* because once we do that then my husband loses all his rights to land etc. We were both unaware of it at the time - we only found out after we tried to buy land. I know there are ways around it, but its a hassle.

And although Helen would also have, "a few provisos thrown in," she says she would still, "marry him for the same qualities obviously, like you'd marry anybody for the qualities that you want to find in somebody you want to live with..."

Rather than change any external factors, hindsight has made Christine consider her own attitude and behaviour. She says she, "would not change a thing except my own way of thinking, be more tolerant and make it easy for myself." June also believes that if she knew what she does now, she would have done things differently, but she would still marry her Thai husband and come to live here. If hindsight has helped these women, what foresight would they have appreciated receiving? What advice do they have from their own experiences that may help other women preparing to do the same?

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\* Register the marriage at the district office. Many women disagree on the advantages or disadvantages of registering their marriage, which is a question beyond the scope of this thesis.

### Advice for Others

Many of the women had some advice to give, which they believe would have made themselves better informed of the risks involved. Catherine who is now divorced said she wished someone had warned her, even though she doubts she would have listened, at least she would have had some idea of the difficulties she was about to face! But now after over 30 years in Thailand she admits that, "I wouldn't know what to say." For although she knows a few successful marriages, she says she knows far too many unsuccessful ones and she used to advise girls not to do it. But as they would go ahead anyway she now says, "Just be aware of the possibilities - it's up to the individual, you may be lucky - just keep your eyes and mind open!" Those that did have advice referred to factors such as residence, expectations and flexibility, love, language, occupation and social outlets, which have all been seen throughout this thesis to influence these relationships and were emphasised in the women's advice.

### Residence

Although Sharon said she found it difficult to know what to say, from her own experience she asserted, "just don't live with the family." Indeed, Karen who has been married and living in Thailand for over 20 years says her advice to anyone considering this kind of marriage would be, "Come and meet the family and stay a while - some men change - be very careful." Although she never had the chance to visit first, she says that compared to many others she knows she, "just lucked-out."

### Love

Is it luck or can love conquer all, as some people believe? Alice has been happily married and living in Thailand for over 30 years. She and her husband believe that,

In order for a marriage to be successful, any marriage but particularly mixed, both partners need to really love each other 100%, then they can be patient, considerate, forgiving, trusting and adapt more easily.

However, Liza who is separated, advises that love doesn't automatically help! She warns women to, "Make sure you know what you are doing - it won't be easy even if he does love you!" Indeed, Wendy says she knows her husband loves her even though he can be unfaithful, and warns that, "Its a lot of effort and heartache, you've got to be prepared to work hard."

### Flexible Expectations

Others, like Pat believe that disappointments can be avoided if you,

Don't set your expectations too high. Learn the language. Be flexible. Its a question of priorities. Know what is important to you - a happy relationship or having your own way over minor issues.

Jane repeats the importance of flexibility and says, "Its up to you what you want, can accept and can adapt to - you have to adjust your expectations." And Alice too notes the need for acceptance,

If you don't accept things, you can't be happy. You have to learn to accept the things you may not particularly like - you don't have to try and change them, just accept them!

Fran also stressed individual attitude and praised the benefits of such mixed marriage. "Its up to you to make the best of your life - if you have a strong relationship and a positive attitude the opportunities from a mixed-marriage are incredible."

### Language

Although many new-comers have been able to survive without knowing much Thai, all the women from both generations who can speak Thai insist that knowing the language is essential for being able to function independently in daily activities and not relying on others to translate what they think is important. In addition, it allows for greater understanding of the society as a whole, and for communication with the husband and extended family, even if they are all fluent in English. Speaking Thai is also said to open-up greater opportunities for social outlets and becoming a part of the environment in which they live.

### Occupation and Social Outlets

As Alison observes, the difficulties women face are not necessarily related to culture or husbands, but to a woman's need for social networks.

It may not be a problem of being married to a Thai, it may just be a problem of being isolated

in a community, or economically dependent, or not having work, or whatever.. rather than being married to a Thai - so for me, who has all those structures in place, work, community, money and independence, I find there are more positives than negatives. Anywhere you are, if you were an American married to an American and in that situation it would be terrible. You should get those networks in place, they're important for any marriage.

Diane echos the importance of social networks:

The first year I think is the hardest, but you can have your work and your own environment, make new friends. But you must be positive and make the best of whatever you have.

Christine's advice to anyone 'following' their husbands here sums up many of the findings in this chapter: "Learn Thai. Get a job. Get a life!"