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Contesting the Margins of Modernity: Women, Migration, and Consumption in Thailand

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# contesting the margins of modernity: women, migration, and consumption in Thailand

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A friend who had been working in Bangkok came back to visit [our village]. She wore beautiful clothes. When she saw me, her greeting was, "Oh ho! How did you get so run-down looking? Want to come work with me?" . . . [That night] I lay thinking, "I ought to go give it a try." I dreamed that I would go [to the city], work really hard, and save money to help my family. I lay unable to stop thinking about this until I slept. I got up early in the morning and at once rushed to find my friend. I was so happy that I could go with her. I got my clothes ready and said good-bye to my brothers, sisters, father and mother [Khem, Bangkok textile worker, age 21]

In this brief passage a young Thai labor migrant gives an account of how she left home to begin urban employment at the age of 16.<sup>1</sup> Central to this narrative is the moral impetus of a daughter's obligation—"I would work really hard and save money to help my family"—that anchors Khem's story in the affective world of village kin and agricultural poverty. But this projection of virtue and self-sacrifice is paralleled by an alternate vision, that of the confident returning migrant with her "beautiful clothes" and teasing disdain for the sorry existence of her rural friend. Khem's thoughts, which propel her rapid departure, are animated as much by the idea of urban sophistication and accumulation as by her concern for the household economy.

Khem's narrative, which places kinship-based morality alongside desires for autonomy and commodified display, highlights widespread themes within rural-urban migration in contemporary Thailand. In these few sentences Khem constructs two potential selves: the "good daughter" who is motivated by emotional ties and a deep sense of responsibility to rural family, and the "modern woman" whose independence and mobility are tied to her experience with urban society. For Khem and thousands of other young women working in Bangkok, both these self-images are desirable and both play a key role in their decisions to migrate to the city; but they are also potentially at odds with each other. Each rests on a different set of priorities: saving money to assist family at home, or spending it to acquire the commodity markers of urban status and modern style. Consequently, rural-urban migration involves much more than a shift in physical location. As young Thai women move into Bangkok employment they engage in a process of self-construction, laying claim to, negotiating, and at times contesting these different aspects of gender identity.

It is important to note that these efforts at self-construction do not necessarily involve an explicit, self-conscious choice between clear and distinct identities. Rather the experiences of

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*Rural women who move to Bangkok for employment confront significant social and economic constraints as low-wage, low-status migrant labor; yet experiences of exploitation in the workplace are widely mediated by aspirations for and participation in new patterns of commodity consumption. In this article, I examine these consumption practices as important sites of cultural struggle in which young women seek to construct new identities and contest their marginalization within the wider society, albeit with conflicting and often ambivalent results. [consumption, discourses of modernity, rural-urban migration, gender, identity, Thailand]*

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young Thai migrants illustrate what Henrietta Moore has identified as the necessity of theorizing the “internally differentiated subject” (1994:58). In this sense the lived experience of individual identity—including that of gender identity—is an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation between and within available “subject positions” (such as “good daughter” or “modern woman” in the case at hand). These subject positions are themselves constituted by the multiple discourses that exist in any society. The hegemonic effects of these discourses may limit what individuals perceive as the subject positions available to them; nevertheless, people continually select between and maneuver within these potential selves or self-images in the course of everyday life (Moore 1994:58–60).

Khem is but one among hundreds of thousands of rural women whose labor in Bangkok manufacturing and service jobs has sustained Thailand’s drive toward the ranks of Asia’s celebrated “newly industrializing countries” (Bell 1992; Girling 1981:178–79).<sup>2</sup> Village households practicing small cash and subsistence crop production have played an essential part in the rapid expansion of Thailand’s urban industrial economy. They provide a highly flexible pool of labor through out-migration while, at the same time, the continuing economic ties between workers and their village homes bear part of the cost of maintaining and reproducing this labor force, thereby allowing urban employers to pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits (Porpora and Lim 1987).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, women like Khem—unmarried and in their late teens and early twenties—now constitute the preferred workforce of many Bangkok employers. Few, if any, communities in rural Thailand, and especially in the economically disadvantaged Northeast (Isan), remain untouched by this youthful outflow. In towns and villages throughout the region it is a virtual cliché to observe that “there is no one left [in the villages] but the old people and little children.” It is by no means true that all young people leave the countryside for urban employment; the high rates at which they are leaving, however, often make it more meaningful to ask any rural household, not whether adolescent children will go to Bangkok, but when.

At one level, this exodus represents yet another example of how an expanding global economy of “flexible accumulation” has targeted young, rural women as an easily controlled and relatively inexpensive workforce (Harvey 1989:153–155). Similar patterns in contemporary experiences of industrialization have been identified around the world and constitute the central focus of a growing literature on the gendered dynamics of late 20th-century capitalism and what is commonly called the New International Division of Labor. These developments are linked to underlying patriarchal assumptions within international capital: young women without the responsibilities of a family are expected to have a limited commitment to wage employment—working for a few months or years before marriage—and consequently can be expected to put up with low pay, limited benefits, and job insecurity. Their youth and gender also suggest a workforce already schooled in obedience to (parental) authority, hard work, and the patience and dexterity required for such domestic chores as weaving and sewing. Women’s character and skills are seen by employers to be particularly well-suited for the fine detail and endless repetition of textile and electronics manufacturing, industries that have dominated the shift to globally dispersed production sites.<sup>4</sup>

In Thailand young men are also important participants in these migration circuits, but I focus my attention here on the experiences of women for several reasons. Contemporary labor migration by rural men, while involving them in new activities and social relations associated with proletarian labor, still parallels historical patterns of male mobility in the form of adventuring travel (*pay thiaw*), or as practiced by itinerant Buddhist monks, cattle sellers, and other traveling salesmen (Kirsch 1966). City-bound migration by men is also consistent with long-standing cultural ideals concerning the acquisition of status and social influence through contact with institutions of power and knowledge located in urban centers (O’Connor 1987, 1995), activities that have long been more accessible for men. Women’s geographic mobility, by contrast, has been conventionally much more restricted, especially before marriage; yet over

the past two decades women (particularly young unmarried women) have begun moving into Bangkok at rates that generally equal those of their male counterparts and at times have exceeded the latter by as much as two to one (NSO 1983, 1992; Wilson 1983:58; see also Aphichat et al. 1979). While I do not wish to argue that urban employment has had no transformative effects on Thai men or on cultural constructions of masculinity, the greater historical and ideological disjunctures surrounding women's mobility reveal in sharper detail some of the structural and ideological tensions at work in contemporary Thai society.

Knowing that young women in Thailand and elsewhere appeal to employers as a presumably quiescent and inexpensive labor force tells us little about why women themselves take up wage work, nor does it tell us how they construct their experiences of it. In Thailand, as in many other parts of the world, explanations of labor migration have usually pointed to the effects of economic disparities between urban and rural sectors.<sup>5</sup> The concentration of capital investment in cities along with widespread conditions of indebtedness, cash dependency, and scarce sources of credit in rural areas foster patterns of labor out-migration from peasant communities all over the world. In such contexts the deployment of sons' or unmarried daughters' labor can be one option available to peasant households seeking to increase their cash income. But current thinking about households as sites of conflict, competing interests, and contested authority (e.g., Wolf 1992) makes it increasingly difficult to accept interpretations of women's employment and migration that presume the functional, strategizing unity of the household. Models that restrict analysis to household economic strategies and the pressures of rural poverty fail to account for the varied dynamics of migration decisions and practices in actual situations. As Diane Wolf's recent comparison of Javanese and Taiwanese workers has shown, parents' ability to direct the labor and control the wages of daughters is an empirical question, the answer to which may vary widely both between and within specific cultural settings (1992:174–178).

In Thailand young women like Khem almost always take credit for the decision to leave the village and find urban work, sometimes with the active support of their parents, sometimes against their will. The economic returns to rural households from daughters' employment are not always clear; parents with whom I spoke often complained about infrequent or inadequate wage remittances. Furthermore, women's out-migration is not limited to the more impoverished segments of a community but involves families across social strata; young women who leave for Bangkok come from poor, middle-range, and even quite prosperous peasant households. It is thus essential to examine the entry of young rural women into urban labor as a product of complex motivations. As Khem's words reveal, labor mobility is embedded in social and cultural tensions within households and within the individual herself. Female labor mobility reflects not just dominant ideals of filial obligation (to "save money to help my family") but equally powerful perceptions of status lost to already mobile peers and desires for "beautiful clothes" and other commodified signifiers of urban glamour and sophistication. The movement of young women into Bangkok has as much to do with aspirations for particular kinds of personhood as with specific material goals.

Cynthia Enloe makes the obvious but often overlooked point that young women around the globe enter and stay in new types of employment—despite low wages, harsh labor discipline, and unhealthy working conditions—not solely for the money earned but also to achieve more complex social goals: "Without women's own needs, values, and worries, the global assembly line would grind to a halt" (Enloe 1989:16–17). As local arenas of social and cultural production increasingly intersect with global processes of capitalist expansion and commodification, the "needs, values, and worries" of Thai women revolve not only around familiar meanings of family and community but also newly imagined (and imaginable) needs and possibilities, often conveyed through technologies of mass communication. In this article I explore how the "needs, values, and worries" that promote the movement of rural Thai women into wage employment are informed not only by local gender and household relations but, no less significantly, by

dominant cultural discourses about Thai modernity and progress. Attention to these complex motivations as they converge and collide in the course of migration can in turn illuminate women's diverse and often ambivalent responses to the urban sojourn. In particular I focus on newly industrialized workers' engagement in novel patterns of commodity consumption. The conflicting and often ambivalent dimensions of labor migrants' choices as consumers reveal some of the ways their experiences both promote and constrain the construction of new ideas about themselves and about the world around them.

### **commodities and consumption as social practice**

Over the last two decades scholars have begun to document women's new and varied experiences of proletarianization in societies around the world. Some of the most exciting research has explored the ways in which encounters with capitalist labor discipline, while often constraining women's choices, may also open up avenues for contestation and resistance. The latter may range from expressions of discontent couched in precapitalist idioms—such as spirit possession in Malay electronics factories (Ong 1987)—to explicitly class-based confrontations, including cases of organized labor protest—such as those among groups of textile workers in South Korea and Mexico (Ogle 1990:80–86; Tirado 1994) and Free Trade Zone employees in the Philippines (Roha 1994:90–91). In addition, experiences of wage labor at different times and places have provided some women room to maneuver within and potentially rework household divisions of labor and authority (see, for example, Benería and Roldán 1987; Lamphere 1987; Safa 1995; Wolf 1992). My goal here is not to dispute these important findings but rather to suggest that in addition to the impact of encounters with new relations of production, it can also be useful to examine the role of new experiences of consumption in these processes of social transformation. The general absence of sustained attention to consumption as social practice in this wider literature on women's global entry into industrial labor is due, at least in part, to the lingering sense that commodity consumption by working-class actors, however necessary for the daily reproduction of their labor power, entails a kind of complicity in their exploitation, for they are consuming the products of their own alienated labor for the profit of capital. Consequently, the pursuit of commodities as markers of symbolic value or social status appears as a particularly insidious form of false consciousness in the face of capitalist hegemony.<sup>6</sup>

Among Thai migrant workers, participation in Bangkok's mass-market commodity culture is one of the most salient aspects of their time in the city. In part this reveals the power of new technologies of representation—television and other forms of mass media—over the popular imagination in Thailand; these now pervasive forms of cultural production invest accumulation and display of commodities with dominant meanings about “progress” and the desirability of modern styles and attitudes. Women's rural-urban labor migration is closely tied to the production of these imagined possibilities in the dominant Thai culture.<sup>7</sup> In effect, their geographic mobility is informed by what Moore has called “fantasies of identity,” that is, “ideas about the kind of person one would like to be and the sort of person one would like to be seen to be by others” (1994:66).<sup>8</sup> For young Thai women, the imagined possibilities of migration and urban employment are intricately bound up in desires for enhanced personal autonomy and status.

The prospect of working in Bangkok conveys a level of independence largely unavailable to women within the village setting and certainly not to unmarried daughters subordinate to parents and other elders. Thai women enjoy a high degree of autonomy as economic actors and household decision makers—at least in comparison to women in more rigidly patriarchal cultures in other parts of Asia—but these conditions are concomitant with marriage and motherhood.<sup>9</sup> Although women's authority may increase with age and the responsibilities of

raising a family, this is small consolation to the adolescent whose peers are all working in Bangkok. Her friends bring back cash and other gifts on their visits home and tell tales about urban life that invoke images of glamour and style she might otherwise only see on television. But if these cultural constructions of urban modernity—what rural youth refer to as “up-to-date” (*than samay*)—help to shape migration aspirations, they do not always fit with the lived realities of Bangkok.

The potential exists for the production of new meanings and practices in the resulting disjunctures between dominant meanings and lived experience, and between imagined possibilities and limited opportunities. William Roseberry (1989:45) argues that the recognition of such breaks between dominant cultural meanings and lived experiences provide subordinate groups with crucial openings to contest hegemonic forms and generate alternative understandings.<sup>10</sup> But if tensions between dominant discourses and lived realities may lead to a critical or oppositional consciousness, they are just as likely to result in more fragmentary, limited, or ambivalent responses. In a recent literature review, Aihwa Ong (1991) argues that attempts to assess women’s reactions to new forms of wage-labor in terms of classical models of proletarian resistance cannot always encompass the conflicting tensions and frequent ambivalence that characterize new encounters with capitalist wage-labor relations. A clear understanding of these relations requires attention to localized patterns of “cultural struggle,” the varied ways that people receive, negotiate, and potentially rework dominant “cultural meaning, values, and goals” in the context of women’s new employment (Ong 1991:281).<sup>11</sup> In this article I examine the consumption aspirations and practices of Thai migrants as precisely such a field of cultural struggle.

The recent emergence of consumption as a focus of ethnographic research is itself a highly contested field of inquiry. By approaching consumption as a form of social practice, I follow Daniel Miller (1995) in arguing for a contextual and contingent analysis, a middle ground between assumptions that commodities are “fetishistic vehicles of false consciousness,” their presence evidence only of hegemonic domination, and overly “romanticized” views in which commodity consumption by subaltern groups is read as evidence of “everyday resistance” (Miller 1995: 271–272; see also Orlove and Rutz 1989).<sup>12</sup> For women working in Bangkok, commodity consumption—both of material goods and of commodified images and events—presents an arena within which they may confront and attempt to rework the tensions and contradictions that underlie their status as urban wage laborers; the result, however, is not necessarily the production of openly critical or oppositional beliefs and practices. This is not to deny that workers’ encounters with capitalist labor relations are a significant aspect of the migration process; as I point out in a later section, the exploitation and discipline of wage work pose serious constraints throughout women’s urban employment. Nevertheless, their experiences as workers do not provide the only or even the most compelling framework through which many migrant women assess their time in the city. Rather it is in new forms of urban consumption as much as on the job—although these fields of action cannot be wholly separated from each other—that the tensions and contradictions of the migration process are most keenly felt. Viewing migrants as consumers, rather than solely as producers, reveals more complex dimensions of women’s urban employment and highlights a powerful avenue by which labor migrants may pursue new forms of autonomy and agency and the construction of socially satisfying and valued identities.

### **migration and discourses of modernity**

When young migrants like Khem speak of their decision to go to Bangkok, their stories almost always invoke the gendered imagery of “good daughters” and “modern women.” In the former image, women’s labor migration invokes obligations of respect and gratitude owed by all

children to their parents; from this perspective migration to Bangkok is an important means for youth to acknowledge their debts to parents by earning money to send home. This is especially significant for young women who, unlike their brothers, cannot serve as Buddhist monks to earn religious merit for their parents. Spending a few months as a monk remains among the most important obligations a son has to his mother and father, one that can often take precedence over economic contributions. Daughters, however, are raised to express their gratitude and loyalty by attending to the day-to-day needs of household members. They are expected to be more industrious and responsible than their brothers in such matters. According to Nid, whose Bangkok wages as a maid in a tourist guesthouse paid for the care of a seriously ill father, young men in the village only “play and run around.” They may spend days, weeks, or months sleeping in the temple or at a friend’s house, she claimed; they do not see what the family needs or lacks. “Men don’t see, they don’t pay attention. But women are responsible, they see what’s missing; they know when there’s not enough rice. Women have to look after the family.” Urban wages present an opportunity for young rural women to fulfill these expectations in a form that is both concrete and highly valued by family at home.

Just as powerful in shaping migration decisions is an explicit desire to be “up-to-date” (than samay) and to participate in Thai modernity. Let me be clear that here the term “modernity” refers not to an objective social reality but to a powerful field of popular discourse and cultural production. In Thailand, as around the world, ideas about modernity are closely linked to an increasingly global capitalist political economy that manifests itself in different forms and provokes varied responses across time and space. The result is what Michael Watts (Pred and Watts 1992:18) identifies as the “production of . . . new, local modernities” out of the historical experiences and the cultural and symbolic resources available to people in specific settings. In contemporary Thailand, discourses of modernity permeate much of everyday life. People at all levels of Thai society are familiar with and frequently employ a language of “being modern” (*khwaam pen than samay*, literally “being up-to-date”), “new times” (*samay may*) and “progress” (*khwaam charoen*) to discuss and at times criticize perceptions and experiences of social and cultural change.<sup>13</sup> For example, the urban elite, scholars, and policy makers frequently debate whether national political and economic development has meant too much modernity—that is, at the expense of what are claimed to be traditional values. To rural producers the images of urban wealth and commodified progress that pervade Thai popular culture pose models of consumption and social status that, however difficult to achieve, are impossible to ignore. In particular, the ownership and display of new technologies and consumer commodities are increasingly valued as symbols of modern success and social status throughout Thailand.

Most rural youths, then, see the move to Bangkok at least in part as an opportunity to be at the center of contemporary Thai society—to “open their ears and eyes” (*poet huu poet taa*)—and to earn the cash necessary to purchase the commodity emblems of a than samay identity.<sup>14</sup> Young rural women confront these seductive attributes of “modern,” than samay, selfhood in a strikingly gendered form: throughout Thailand images of the beautiful than samay woman—on billboards, television advertisements, serial dramas, and in many other formats—set powerful standards for defining this status. Moreover, city life provides a multitude of settings and social institutions—from beauty parlors and shopping malls to movie theaters and nightclubs—where migrants can observe and pursue these standards of modern womanhood.

Bangkok is the center for the production and dissemination of meanings and symbols of Thai progress (*khwaam charoen*) and than samay styles. The spread of communications technology throughout the country—most notably television and radio, a development in which the remittances of migrant workers have played no small part—has made Bangkok styles and standards a presence even in remote communities. In turn these sights and sounds of the modern Thai nation present rural audiences with images that equate personal fulfillment with urban-based identities and commodity consumption. Moreover, the availability of mass consumer

products in commercial markets throughout the country provides tangible means for appropriating these symbols of up-to-date selfhood—only, of course, if one has access to sufficient cash income. Migration for urban employment not only offers village youth the opportunity to earn the money they need but also allows young women and men to participate in this culture of modernity at its most dynamic core, the Bangkok Metropolis. Let us examine a television commercial:

Two young women in their early twenties face each other across a café table in downtown Bangkok, casually sipping coffee and laughing at each other's stories. A soundtrack of lively pop music renders their conversation inaudible. These are carefree and sophisticated women and their clothing bears witness to this—one wears a sleeveless, front-buttoning chemise, the other a loose, draping blouse with dangling decorative strings; both sport fashionable earrings and blue jeans. Also the venue, an air-conditioned café, and their beverage, hot coffee, are distinctive signs of urbanity and at least middle-class wealth. A young, strikingly handsome man passes their table but the two women do not return his interested glance—although they are clearly aware of it. The next moment the two women have left the café and are dashing boldly across the mad traffic of a Bangkok road, laughing and holding hands as close friends do. The fast rhythm of the musical soundtrack seems to match the dynamic pace of the women's motion—long hair flowing out behind them, stylish leather shoulder bags bumping against their denimed hips. Now the view cuts to a changing room lined with lockers where the two women are breathlessly beginning to disrobe; neither has sought the privacy of a separate cubicle or the more common technique of changing under a sarong wrap. Suddenly the pop-rock soundtrack changes to the sedate, classical sounds of the *khim* (a Chinese cembalo—a low, flat, stringed musical instrument played by striking the strings with two delicate felt-covered mallets). Simultaneously, the visual image switches to the *khim* players: they are the same two women, but now clad in demure though no less stylish skirts and long-sleeved blouses. They sit formally on the floor behind their instruments at slightly oblique angles to each other; they are playing in what appears to be a spacious, modern performance hall. The two smile knowingly at each other as the logo and picture of a scented deodorant fades in on the lower half of the viewer's screen.

In the slick, sophisticated packaging of Thailand's media, whether television commercials and movies or printed posters and magazines, women and women's bodies provide a predominant source of visual imagery. Feminine beauty has become one of the most powerful symbols for representing Thai progress and modernity. In advertising and the entertainment media, the beautiful woman is celebrated and promoted as an example of "up-to-date" style and independence. The fashionably dressed, stylishly coifed, carefully made-up "modern woman" (*phuu ying than samay*) parades her beauty at work and leisure in the city setting. Although the *than samay* woman may be identified with the urban context, and especially with Bangkok, national television and the print media as well as villagers' own encounters with educated, middle-class women of district and provincial towns have made images of modern femininity increasingly familiar to the entire population.

*Than samay* beauty is not defined primarily through conventional images of maidenly modesty and interpersonal restraint—ideal standards of behavior for unmarried women in the countryside—although, as in the final scene to the deodorant commercial, these qualities may be invoked to establish the essential "good girl" characteristics of a modern woman. Instead the modern woman is identified, on the one hand, by her sophisticated use of fashion and other market commodities of bodily display, and, on the other, by the ease with which she negotiates the diverse scenes and dynamic pace of urban life. Like the young women laughing over their coffee or dashing across a busy street, the *than samay* woman's beauty is linked to her active, mobile participation in urban society.

Part of what draws young rural women into the city is an unspoken but powerful suggestion that there they can be at once beautiful, modern, and mobile. With an urban income they can enhance their own beauty and modernity; they can participate in the adventure, excitement, and independence of modern city life. Indeed, one of the most valued benefits for migrants is that urban employment allows them to work indoors, away from the skin-darkening effects of the sun. White skin is a crucial marker of physical beauty in both urban and rural Thai aesthetic systems. Older villagers often describe women and men moving into Bangkok as "going to get [white] skin" (*pay aw phiw*). While some offer these comments as a disparagement of youthful



vanity, migrants on return visits are frequently complimented on their pale skin. At the same time that they acquire such signs of modern attractiveness, young migrants also hope that by sending money back to parents and siblings they can maintain their standing within the home community as good women and daughters.

Than samay beauty and urban consumer lifestyles present seductive models for how young women might retain and enhance their youthful beauty while exercising their own independence and mobility. Nevertheless, aspects of than samay womanhood contrast sharply with household-based values of maidenly modesty, virginal beauty, and constraints on female spatial mobility. The portrayal of women and women's bodies in the dominant urban-centered culture, linking beauty with modernity and active sexuality, flirts dangerously with equally powerful ideas about beauty predicated upon women's sexual propriety and modesty. The deodorant commercial is a case in point. The loose abandon with which the two women begin to disrobe carries a strong suggestion of sexual freedom: nudity is associated with sexual experience or availability, just as physical modesty is equated with virginity. Highly sexualized images of women's bodies, already familiar to villagers from television, movies, and other media, are reinforced in urban settings by the proliferation of commercial enterprises—shopping malls, salons, nightclubs, discos, massage parlors, and go-go bars—many of which link the celebration of modern female beauty to the actual sale of women's sexual services (Van Esterik 1988). This association of commercial sex work with popular and contemporary images of femininity points to a darker side of modern Thai womanhood. The prostitute stands as a reminder of the disreputable consequences that being too modern and too up-to-date may entail for the unwary.<sup>15</sup>

Migration decisions, then, involve a fragile convergence between young women's sense of duty and her desire for adventure. Working in the city offers women the chance—before marriage and motherhood—to pursue a level of personal autonomy unavailable to them in the village, while at the same time allowing them to uphold their obligations to their families.<sup>16</sup> In Bangkok lies the possibility to be both a modern woman and a good daughter. Once they have arrived in the city, however, the realities of low wages, minimal benefits, and often harsh working and living conditions mean that daughterly responsibilities and the pursuit of than samay ideals of autonomy and material display frequently come into conflict.

### **being up-to-date: migrants and commodity consumption**

The young women that I knew both in Bangkok and in rural communities found these images of than samay identity compelling and the prospect of remaining at home dull by comparison. When describing their experiences before coming to the city, many migrants alluded to feelings of boredom: “in the village there's nothing to do.” The Bangkok they see on nightly television broadcasts and hear about from friends is, by contrast, a place of boundless novelty and excitement. As one young textile worker explained, “I had to go see for myself.” Perhaps more important, Bangkok is also where they can earn the money needed to actively enjoy the style and amenities of a modern identity. Thip, a textile worker who left her village home at age 19, wanted to work in Bangkok because “at home there was no money and nothing to do. I wanted to have lots of money, money to send home and to buy things for myself as well.”

Urban wages, or more particularly what those wages can buy, provide the primary vehicle for most migrants' aspirations to modernity; in some ways, however, young women's desires to be up-to-date can be addressed through the work experience itself, especially when they find employment in Bangkok's booming manufacturing sector. In contrast to the undesirable and decidedly old-fashioned associations of peasant production (hard, heavy, largely unmechanized work performed outdoors), urban factories in themselves carry an attractive aura of participation in than samay society (lighter—even if highly repetitive tasks—that involve

impressive new technologies and are performed indoors, away from the sun and rain). Migrants express pride in the acquisition of technical skills such as the ability to run complex textile machinery. Other aspects of the work process—such as special uniforms, or, most common in larger factories, management-sponsored sports competitions, beauty contests, or annual banquets—can be invested with a positive sense of *than samay* style. The employer-sponsored “Sports Days” that I attended at two Bangkok textile factories were good examples. While each aimed, in not very subtle ways, to promote worker identification—pitting groups from different production departments or different factories owned by the same parent company against each other—the events also incorporated a wide array of commodities and other emblems of modernity. Players donned new shirts, hats, and other items printed in special team colors and marked with company insignia; in one case those who wished to participate in the day’s activities were required to purchase these items out of their own wages. At the same time workers sitting on the sidelines participated in animated chants and cheers modeled on the cheering songs of university and college students, an arena of *than samay* prestige and status with which many migrants would otherwise have little contact. A sound system providing loud music, microphones for announcers and cheerleaders, and trophies or prizes for the winners of each contest added to an overall atmosphere of excitement and modern style.<sup>17</sup> But if factories can project an image of “up-to-date” agency and status to employees, this image is not always easy for employees to sustain, especially as migrants struggle to cope with low wages and limited benefits. Employees in large manufacturing companies generally earn the legal minimum (just under U.S.\$4.00 per day in 1990), but even after many years of service wages rarely rise much above this.<sup>18</sup> Many women in Bangkok earn even less. In the late 1980s 50 or 60 baht per day (U.S.\$2.00–2.50) was not an uncommon wage for workers on temporary or probationary contracts, an arrangement that until the passage of legislation in 1990 could be prolonged for months and sometimes years. Earning lower than minimum wages was frequent among the women I interviewed, especially those working in small garment factories or piece-rate sweat shops; less than minimum wages was the rule for those employed in streetside restaurants or as domestic servants.<sup>19</sup> Even when an employer paid the legal minimum, many women reported that their already low wages could be further depressed by fines for lateness, failure to make production quotas, or minor infractions of shop-floor regulations.

Wage limitations are often compounded by women’s encounters with the rigid time-discipline of urban work. Small shops that subcontract for larger companies, especially common in Bangkok’s large garment industry, usually pay employees on a piece-rate basis and frequently operate 12 hours or more each day, especially when an order is due. Larger manufacturing enterprises have standard eight-hour shifts; overtime, however, can be frequent and may involve anywhere from two to eight additional hours of work.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the largest factories tend to operate in three shifts around the clock. Shifts rotate once a week, forcing workers into a new cycle of sleep and eating every seven days. Even without the strains of overtime, this constant upheaval in daily routines frequently results in health problems such as disrupted menstruation, headaches and insomnia, and intestinal problems and ulcers, not to mention some of the more immediate physical threats to which women may be exposed in the workplace—toxic chemicals and gases, accidents caused by improperly maintained machinery or worker fatigue, respiratory infections from poorly ventilated work sites, and so on.

While acknowledging the hardships of long hours and often unpleasant, if not unsafe, working conditions, many of the migrants I interviewed appreciated their relative freedom after working hours. Company dormitories or rented rooms in the slums are often crowded, hot, and dirty, yet they still offer the chance to escape from direct supervision on the shop floor. It is here, at the end of the shift and outside the factory gates, that migrants are best able to explore and absorb images of sophisticated urban lifestyles by watching television and popular movies or going to department stores, entertainment parks, and similar sites of modernity. For many young

women, these ventures into urban consumer culture are valued aspects of their time in the city and it is the opportunity to engage in these new consumption practices as much as concerns over difficulties on the job that preoccupy them on a day-to-day basis.

The young women to whom I spoke were often reluctant to reveal exactly how much they spent in the city, especially on nonessential items; yet any visit to the rooms of young workers reveals the importance given to commodity purchases and display. Ut and Tiw's small lodging is a case in point. From May to November of 1990, I regularly visited the two sisters at their rented room, one of four tiny partitions on the second floor of an old wooden house. It measured about two and one-half meters across and four meters long. One corner was walled off as a tiny bath and toilet area and another was used as a makeshift kitchen with a few pots and dishes, an electric rice cooker, and a small gas ring. The rest of the room was furnished with a few blankets and cushions along with Ut and Tiw's prize possessions. An electric fan sat in one corner, usually idle unless the sisters were entertaining visitors. On a set of shelves by one wall a small tape deck stood next to a row of cassettes. These included recordings by well-known Thai performers of popular "folk" style vocal music,<sup>21</sup> as well as recent albums by Thai pop-rock groups. A half-dozen small photo albums and a camera occupied another shelf, while yet another held a haphazard collection of cosmetics—a bottle or two of deodorant, powder, and lotion—along with combs, brushes, small novelty items, hair clips, and ribbons. Not long after I first began to visit Ut and Tiw, I arrived one week to discover that a small color television had been added to their belongings, the culmination of nearly three years' effort. The sisters had saved the 7500 baht (U.S.\$300) purchase price out of their wages and by taking on occasional piece-rate assembly work given out by Tiw's company for those wanting to earn extra money on their own time.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to acquiring particular mass-market commodities, participation in new commodified patterns of sociality is equally attractive to many rural-urban migrants. At home a young woman is enmeshed in an intense web of social relations with parents and siblings, neighbors, and friends, all of whom can observe, comment upon, and potentially influence her behavior. As factory workers in the city, migrants enjoy the most immediate and intimate social interaction almost exclusively with friends and coworkers, the majority being of similar age and background. The expectations and interests of their peers play an important role in shaping the consumption behavior of many migrants.

Working side-by-side, sharing a rented room or living in the common quarters of factory dormitories, young women find themselves in an intense world of peer-oriented companionship, far removed from the authority of parents and elders that frame and intersect such ties in the village setting. Friendly pressures to participate in common activities—such as shared meals and outings—place steady demands on the cash earnings of young workers. Many of the young women that I knew in Bangkok described themselves as "great spenders" (*chay ngoen keng*, literally, "good at using money"). Money, they said, is hard to keep, not because of large or flamboyant purchases but because of the everyday demands of urban existence, including the desire to hang out and have fun with friends. In my experience these interactions rarely took the form of competitive consumption in the form of having better or more expensive items than others, or treating friends to meals or snacks. Instead, the factory workers I knew were quite scrupulous in their attempts to even out expenses, to pay their own share of meals eaten at streetside restaurants, to repay small debts (such as money borrowed during a trip to the market) to coworkers, and so forth. The egalitarian emphasis of these interactions nevertheless supports a constant focus on consumption: whether gatherings revolve around purchased meals,<sup>23</sup> trips to local markets, or, more rarely, spending a day off at one of the city's commercial amusement parks (such as "Happyland" or the part-zoo, part-rock concert venue, "The Crocodile Farm"). Participating in peer group activities also requires investing in certain kinds of commodity

display such as urban styles of clothing, especially those including one or more pairs of blue jeans.

These peer group “outings” (pay thiaw) in search of fun and entertainment are, for many migrants, among the most satisfying experiences of life in Bangkok. Given migrants’ limited leisure hours and low wages, a thiaw is usually brief—an afternoon’s trip to the market, a shopping mall, or a park; but it may also be a much longer excursion, perhaps over a holiday weekend, to the beach or more commonly to a friend’s home in a distant and unfamiliar province. Such outings offer a dramatic break from the tedium and exhaustion of factory shifts. They also offer the best chances for most migrants to approximate dominant images of a modern lifestyle by their own actions. Women dress carefully for these events, usually in blue jeans and colorful blouses or tee-shirts. Other commodities like cameras can also be in high demand, especially on longer trips.<sup>24</sup>

Even a small thiaw involves the mobilization of such commodity symbols of than samay self-presentation. One Sunday afternoon (the day most factory workers have free) I was visiting Ut and several other women from her village who all worked at the same Bangkok textile factory. We had gathered in Ut’s rented room but soon decided to go visit some young men from the same village who were living in a one-room flat about 30 minutes away by bus. In preparation, two of the women had to go back to their dormitory rooms to change out of the casual shorts they were wearing; I stayed with Ut and her friend, Noi, who had suggested the outing. While we waited, Noi looked over Ut’s small collection of cosmetics and began to try on two different colors of lipstick. When she turned back to us, Ut had finished changing into a pair of black stretch slacks. Noi scolded her: “Don’t you want to wear something more up-to-date [than samay]? You look like a country hick [*duu baan nohk loey*].” Ut quickly changed into a pair of blue jeans, even though they were not quite dry from the morning’s laundry.

### **urban dilemmas: confronting ambivalence and marginality**

While the acquisition and display of commodities in these ways provide crucial demonstrations of than samay identity and status among migrant peers, within the broader urban setting these claims receive little recognition. Amid Bangkok’s exploding consumerism, migrants’ consumption patterns—restricted as they are by low wages and limited leisure time—offer only a weak approximation of up-to-date urban living. There are always more and newer commodities to acquire, more places to see, more outings to take. Wearing jeans and cosmetics, and taking trips to the Crocodile Farm or an air-conditioned department store are pleasant and attractively than samay activities. Surrounded by the city’s hypermodernity and intense commercialization, however, rural women’s access to and control over the extensive cultural repertoire of “being up-to-date” is partial at best.

It is not surprising, then, that the women I knew in Bangkok almost universally expressed ambivalence about their experiences in the city. And their unease tended to increase over time. In the words of one woman with nearly 20 years of migration experience: “Bangkok is a city of heaven and a city of hell.” Many migrants acknowledged the “heavenly” aspects of urban life: the city is a place of “progress” (*khwaam charoen*) where people and society are “up-to-date” (*than samay*). Living there has taught them a great deal; it has “opened the ears, opened the eyes.” They appreciate the many comforts and conveniences of city life: easy access to running water, electricity, transportation, markets, and entertainment. And central to these advantages is the fact that “in the city there’s money, in the village there’s none.” Just as recognizable, however, is Bangkok’s “hellish” side: the pollution, noise, and congestion; crowded living spaces in which, nevertheless, it is very easy to feel alone and isolated; insecure, unhealthy, and often oppressive working conditions. Among the women I knew, whether they had worked in Bangkok for six months or 16 years, enthusiasm for the than samay qualities of city living

was always tempered by unease about its alien and alienating aspects. In some cases these tensions lead to an explicit critique of their circumstances, sometimes in the form of active participation in trade unions and labor protest (Mills 1994); but labor organizing remains a difficult and often risky venture. Only a tiny minority of migrant workers even have access to independent union institutions. The vast majority of migrants in Bangkok responds to the ambivalence engendered by urban experiences with less radical actions, neither outright resistance nor passive acquiescence, but what might better be described as “coping strategies” (see Lamphere 1987:30). A major focus of these strategies is the maintenance of connections with rural kin and community.

Throughout my fieldwork, suggestions to migrant women that their urban sojourns had turned them into city people brought sharp denials, usually accompanied by a strong affirmation of a rural identity. In the words of Daeng, a 20-year-old textile operative:

People in the city and people in the village aren't the same. City people, Bangkok people, you can't trust them, they only think of themselves. In the city people don't know each other. I've lived in this room for many months now and I still don't know the neighbors. In the village I know everyone. We grow up together, we're all relatives and friends together. I know where they come from, their background. I can trust them.

Ties to rural family and community remain crucial to most migrant women, no matter how long their stay in Bangkok.<sup>25</sup> Almost without exception women speak of plans to return to live in their villages; periodic visits home are eagerly planned and awaited.

The continuing strength of this identification with rural family and community—what informs the “good daughter” imagery of Khem’s and other migrants’ stories—is at least partly rooted in pragmatic assessments of their longer term insecurity as urban laborers. Migrants’ experiences with urban employment policies contribute significantly to these concerns. Few factories, they say, will hire women over the age of 25, and some restrict new hiring to women of 21 or younger. Women who stay in the city after their mid-twenties are very careful not to lose their current employment lest they find themselves choosing between a premature return home or poorly paid informal sector work such as domestic service or subcontracted sweatshop labor. Similar fears underlie a widespread reluctance among migrant women to marry and start a family in the city. Workers know well that urban employers tend to prefer not only youthful but also unmarried, unencumbered employees. A married woman or a woman with children is at a significant disadvantage in the labor market. Aware of their marginal position within the urban labor market, rural women realize that a return to the village household remains their most reliable source of economic security after marriage. Poor married women in Bangkok are often relegated to a secondary labor market of insecure, low-paying jobs such as scavenging, small-scale cottage industries, and vending (Thorbeck 1987:61, 72–75). The insecurity and hardship of such a future was widely acknowledged by the migrants I met.

These concerns are only strengthened by women’s own perceptions that men in the city are often unreliable providers. “Men are not responsible”; “men like to have lots of wives”; “men drink, gamble, and spend their money on their friends”—these were all commonly expressed opinions. Many of the migrants with whom I spoke felt that if a woman settled in the city there was a good chance that she would have to support herself and her children on her own. Almost universally women told me that men in the city were more likely to run after other women and not contribute to the household budget. And most can point to a friend or acquaintance whose city romance has left her in difficult straits. On one occasion, I went with several textile workers to visit a former coworker who had been abandoned by her husband. We spent an hour or two helping her assemble small plastic holders for artificial flowers; with this work she earned a small piece-rate wage—amounting to less than 30 baht (U.S.\$1.20) per day—to support herself and her infant son. On the return trip, my companions were quick to point out the cautionary effects of their friend’s situation. Said one, “You see, Mary, marriage only means problems for

women. A good man, one to trust, is hard to find. You've got to be careful." Although abuse and neglect occur in village families, most women believed both that it was less frequent and that the consequences for women were less severe because of their access to the moral and economic support of relatives and neighbors.<sup>26</sup> In the city a young woman may be free from familial supervision but she is also no longer within easy reach of familial assistance. Some women I know responded to these circumstances by deciding—usually after working in Bangkok until their late twenties or older—that they would prefer not to marry at all, but most women were not willing to forego the pleasures—and sacrifices—of having a family of their own. Yet when they did marry, these women said, it would be to men of rural background, preferably from their own village or region, with whom they would then return to live in the country. And, with few exceptions, those migrants of my acquaintance who later married did exactly that.

But this generalized perception of long-term vulnerability in the city does not mean that the prospect of a return home is without problems. If the idea of settling in the city is fraught with difficulty, going home to a future of rice farming and motherhood raises a different set of concerns. These are linked to migrants' ongoing aspirations for than samay forms of success and autonomy. The wages they can earn in Bangkok, limited though they may be, provide a steady and individualized source of cash income, unlike the more irregular, often unpredictable, and collective earnings that characterize household agricultural production. A former textile worker in her mid-twenties, having returned home to prepare for her marriage to a local man, was quick to identify the unfortunate consequences that this move would have. She was happy with her prospective husband, but their union would put an end to her time in Bangkok; from then on she would be "only a mother and housewife." Her sense of loss was shared by many young women as they contemplated leaving urban work for the burdens of raising their own family.

One response among migrant women is to plan for a return home but to do so in a way that will preserve some of their hard-won than samay status and autonomy. A common ambition is to open a small shop or food vending enterprise. Others who are able to marshal their resources and energy during their limited leisure hours choose to invest in further education or vocational training. Maew, an employee in a leather bag factory, decided at age 19 to reduce drastically both her expenditures in the city and her remittances home in order to pay for a high school education. When I met her she had been taking adult education classes every Sunday for the previous two years; she expected to complete her diploma in another two or three years. She was also saving money in a bank account, so that when she left Bangkok to go home she would be able to continue her education at the provincial teachers' college. Lek, a textile worker from the same village as Maew, saved her wages until she could pay the 7000 baht (U.S.\$280) tuition at a Bangkok beauty school. On her days off from the factory she attended classes and practiced the skills of hairdressing and cosmetic application. Although Lek did not think that she could make a living in this way in her village, she thought she might be able to find a job in a hairdressing shop in a nearby town.

Lek and Maew were somewhat unusual in their ability to marshal their resources for such specific long-term goals. For Maew this decision resulted in an ongoing conflict with family members in the village—particularly with her mother, who regularly requested that Maew contribute money to the rural household and periodically threatened to travel to Bangkok (and did so on at least one occasion) to get the money from Maew in person. Most of the rural-urban migrants that I knew either had less concrete plans for their future or were unable or unwilling to ignore parental expectations so consistently. Nevertheless, they too hoped to be more than just "rice and upland crop farmers" (*chaaw naa chaaw ray*) when they left the city. Achieving this goal is difficult—and even Maew and Lek wondered whether their educational investments would really pay off in the end. Moreover, young women who plan and work toward a

successful return to the village may find that circumstances intervene. A sudden illness, an accident on the job, factory layoffs, a family crisis, or, as in the following example, the competing demands and expectations of parents—such events can quickly force a woman into an agonizing decision.

This was Noi's predicament during her sixth year of urban employment when—in part for reasons of kin ties with the prospective in-laws—her parents pressured her into becoming engaged to a man she did not want to marry. Immediately after the engagement was formalized Noi fled back to Bangkok and refused to see or talk to her parents or fiancé when they followed her. Spending time with sympathetic friends, Noi took to drinking herself into a stupor at regular intervals. She was eventually able to break off the match, but only after several months of anguish and self-destructive behavior. As she said at the time, she felt trapped and did not know what to do: "How can I live with someone I don't like? If I don't like him now, I'm not going to like him later." Significantly Noi argued that her fiancé had "never even been to Bangkok." In other words, he would appreciate neither the kind of experiences she had enjoyed there nor the person she had become as a result.<sup>27</sup>

Not all women encounter the conflicting cultural and economic expectations of rural-urban migration in the same fashion as Noi. They nonetheless confront a similar dilemma during their time in the city. Attempts to pursue than samay aspirations are fundamentally at odds with young women's obligations to rural kin. Whatever the purpose of their urban expenditures—personal items, daily needs, entertainment with friends, education, or vocational training—every baht spent in Bangkok is, at least in theory, one baht less for the family at home. New patterns of commodity consumption, while necessary for the pursuit of a than samay sense of self, confront migrants both with their own marginal status within the dominant, commodified culture of Bangkok and with their potential (or actual) failure to maintain the ideal image of a "good daughter." Although, among the women I interviewed, the economic hardships of rural households were rarely the primary motivating factor in their migration decisions, all recognized the moral force of family obligations. Women who described themselves as "good spenders" (*chay ngoen keng*) often did so in the context of explaining their irregular remittances to village kin.<sup>28</sup> The amount and frequency of migrants' contributions to rural households varied widely among the women I interviewed; women commonly reported contributions totaling anywhere from 30–80 percent of monthly income, but these initial claims were usually revealed later on to represent much more occasional remittances. There were very few women who would admit to never having sent money, but most agreed that they would rather wait and save a particular sum (often 2,000 or 3,000 baht, U.S.\$80–\$120) over several months; they could then take this money home on a visit instead of sending back smaller but more frequent contributions.<sup>29</sup>

In part this pattern allowed the women to exercise greater control over the use of their earnings by saving for particular consumption projects, the most common being the purchase of materials to use in building their parents a new house. These goals are often supported by rural kin but they can also be frustrated by periodic demands for increased or immediate contributions. Some of these requests tend to come at regular intervals: calls for help with harvest or transplanting expenses, or with younger siblings' school costs at the beginning of term—for uniforms, books, high school tuition, and so forth. At other times migrants will be called upon to help out in a household emergency, particularly when a sudden or severe illness strikes. Although young women may complain among themselves that people in the village think only about money, most migrants do their best to comply with requests from home. But sometimes daughters find themselves in the position of censoring the consumption demands of their own parents. For example, when Lan's mother asked for a color television to replace the black-and-white set that Lan and a sister (also working in the city) had bought a few years before, Lan responded with some exasperation, "I'm saving now for the cost of building her a new house. [My sister and I] bought the supporting posts last year. Mother will have to wait for the television."

Such feelings are aggravated by a perceived—and often actual—difference between men’s and women’s respective consumption behavior. Both in the city and the village, Thai men are allowed more discretionary use of their personal income. Parents and kin usually expect young men to bear considerable expense for entertainment: cigarettes, alcohol, gambling, and women. While parents generally view a certain amount of personal expenditure as unavoidable for migrant daughters, it should not be of the same type or on the same scale as that demanded by young men’s urban consumption practices. According to some women in the city, daughters who fail to send home money are liable to far greater criticism from parents and other villagers than are delinquent sons. Several spoke of migrant brothers who had “never” or only infrequently sent home their city earnings; their parents “never said anything about it.”

If the demands of urban consumption styles jeopardize the fragile balance of migrants’ desires to be both “modern women” and “good daughters,” there are moments when migrants can confront these tensions and rework them to their own benefit. Here the importance of maintaining ties to rural kin can be seen as not only a matter of migrants’ pragmatic concerns for the future but also because through trips home—which include bringing money, wearing new clothes, and being accompanied by new friends—migrants can resolve, however briefly, the disjunctions of urban life and project a solid identity of both than samay success and filial respect and gratitude. This is a crucial aspect of one of the most popular activities in which rural-urban migrants engage: the organization of, and participation in, elaborate ceremonial trips to make ritual donations to village temples. Although framed within the merit-making language of popular religious discourse, the enthusiasm with which migrants participate in these events often has less to do with the desire to add to their store of karmic merit (although such goals are by no means irrelevant) than with the opportunities that these trips provide to resolve, if only temporarily, some of the tensions encountered during the course of their urban experiences. Specifically, these merit-making trips are occasions when migrants’ than samay consumption practices parallel and even support their commitment to their village homes.

On these occasions several people, usually from the same village, plan an excursion, rent a bus, and recruit friends in the city to come along. Passengers pay a fare for the bus trip and contribute to a merit fund that will be offered to the community temple. These trips are organized around significant temple ceremonies: an ordination, commonly held at the beginning of the Buddhist Lenten season; a *thoht kathin*, the ritual presentation of new robes to monks at the end of this season; or, most often, a *thoht phaa paa* (“offering of forest robes”) that may be held at almost any time of year. All involve rituals during which, in addition to the presentation of robes and other items to resident monks, significant offerings can be made to the host temple. In this way a donation of several thousand baht may be collected, usually for a particular purpose such as the construction of new temple buildings.

But organizing a merit-making trip, as the women I knew quickly pointed out, means much work. A successful trip, one that raises a substantial amount of money, depends on recruiting many participants. Migrants from the same village, including both women and men, must coordinate the project among themselves—not an easy task when they may live and work in opposite ends of Bangkok and seldom have access to private telephone lines. A rented bus must be reserved for the occasion, invitations to participants and envelopes for their contributions printed, and donors solicited. This last task is often the most troublesome. One worker in a large cotton factory complained that every year so many ceremonies took place that she was reluctant to ask her friends to contribute to yet another one. “If you ask them they try to give something but it may only be ten baht (U.S.\$0.40). And finding people to be *kamakaan* (committee members) is really hard.” This latter category is largely an honorary position; the incumbent’s name is printed on official invitations and any other documents acknowledging key participants. In return for this honor, however, the committee member is expected to contribute a significant sum of money, usually at least 100 baht (about U.S.\$4.00)—the equivalent of a day’s pay or



more for most migrant workers. Kamakaan should also attend the ceremony in person, although this is not considered essential. If the trip's organizers cannot recruit enough people to be kamakaan, the chances of collecting a respectable donation are seriously reduced. Should this happen, I was told, the organizers would lose face at home for bringing in a disappointing amount. For example, when Ut and her friends—all from the same Northeastern village—were approached in the fall of 1990 by their community's leaders to help organize a thoht phaa paa from Bangkok, they were less than enthusiastic. The village was planning to build a new temple *saa/aa* (meeting hall), the full cost of which was expected to be close to several hundred thousand baht (U.S.\$10,000). Although the thoht phaa paa was not expected to raise anywhere near the full amount, the women were clearly reluctant to take on the task: "We just did one last year," several told me, "and already they want another one!" They were not sure it would be worth all the time and effort.

It is clear from such comments that these ceremonial trips do not in fact erase the tensions that arise in the course of migration experiences; in the actual performance of these events, however, migrants enact the close convergence of ongoing ties to kin and community with their claims to than samay autonomy and urban success. On the several merit-making trips I attended, a large passenger bus, packed with people and decorated on one side with a long banner proclaiming the destination and ceremonial objective of its purpose, left Bangkok in the evening; this usually took place on a Saturday at the end of the afternoon factory shift. We traveled all night, arriving at the host community by the middle of the morning or earlier. Each time, the journey began in an atmosphere of celebration and revelry that continued throughout the night, fueled in part by a steady flow of alcohol (consumed mostly but not exclusively by men), along with soft drinks and other treats purchased by passengers in anticipation of the evening's festivities. Those who tried to rest their heads against seat backs and windows in the hope of catching a little sleep were loudly serenaded by their more energetic companions, usually with the aid of a microphone hooked into the bus's internal sound system and backed by drums and cymbals brought along by the celebrants. Sometime during the night the organizers of the trip passed through the bus collecting envelopes they had distributed earlier and that passengers had filled with cash contributions. The amounts would later be recorded along with participants' names for the final offering at the temple.

The ceremony itself took place soon after reaching the host community. On one thoht phaa paa to a village in the Northeastern province of Khon Kaen, we arrived in time to complete the phaa paa presentation before the daily offering of the monks' late morning meal, the food for which had been prepared in large quantities by villagers so that everyone attending could eat once the monks had consumed their share. The presentation of money for the temple was the focus of the ritual but it also included offerings of commodity items for the personal use of resident monks: robes, bath and laundry soap, toilet paper, packaged drinks, and drink mixes such as Ovaltine. These were presented in elaborate cellophane wrapped bundles, a format that has been standardized by urban stores specializing in such ready-to-go merit packages. The ceremony ended with speeches by community leaders and the most senior organizers of the thoht phaa paa, and with ritual chants and blessings led by the temple monks. Meanwhile the final amount of money donated had been tallied and was announced for everyone to hear. The largest contributors were awarded special recognition in the form of gifts of cloth and pillows.

When the ritual itself was finished the merit makers could finally relax. Migrants visited with family and introduced the friends who had accompanied them from Bangkok. Fresh from the successful display of devotion to temple and community concerns, they could enjoy their status, however temporary, as good daughters and sons whose successful sojourns as modern wage workers in the nation's capital had made their contributions to the prosperity of the village temple possible—and by extension of the community as a whole. The congratulatory atmos-

phere continued well into the evening with a performance by a folk-opera (*moh lam*) troupe hired by the host community for the occasion. The next morning it was time to get back on the bus and return to the city. This trip had been planned to coincide with a national long-weekend holiday, making it possible to stay away for an extra night. (The merit makers usually return to Bangkok on the same day, having spent only a few hours in the host village, in order not to risk missing a day's work.) On most merit trips the return journey is a chance for yet more excitement; organizers choose a route that will include at least one (and sometimes several) sightseeing attractions. These may include famous temples, caves, waterfalls, national parks, dams, or archaeological ruins. Organizers frequently play up the attractions of these natural and architectural sites when recruiting their friends to participate in a merit-making trip. Returning from the thoht phaa paa ceremony in Khon Kaen, for example, we detoured nearly two hours to visit the site of a major hydroelectric power dam. Cameras clicked; souvenirs and samples of local delicacies were purchased. The passengers became modern tourists for a few whirlwind hours before the bus turned toward Bangkok once again.

Young people working in Bangkok acknowledge the religious merit that participants earn on these excursions but often accord more emphasis to their entertainment value. This combination of spiritual and worldly purposes in merit-making ceremonies is central to the power of these ritual events to help defuse ongoing conflicts, at least temporarily, between migrants' aspirations for achievement within the dominant culture of urban modernity and their continuing attachments to village family and community. Thoht phaa paa and other ceremonial trips provide an opportunity to display success and to show off urban friends to people back home, as well as to renew and affirm solidarity with the rural community and its moral focus, the temple. It is one of the few moments when fulfilling one's filial obligations as a good village native and the pursuit of *than samay* identity appear to coincide.

Moreover, the migrants achieve this balance by acting in the most prestigious arena of the Thai social and moral order: Buddhist merit making. Offerings of money, robes, and other items earns spiritual merit for all participants and especially the organizers. In addition, the money raised by a thoht phaa paa is often earmarked for new temple construction or renovation, widely viewed as among the most meritorious acts to which a person can contribute. The value of earning merit in this way is acknowledged by organizers and participants alike, even as they appreciate the opportunities for worldly entertainment that the trips offer. In addition, merit-making trips require—and demonstrate for all to see—a level of organizational skill and material sacrifice that would not usually be expected of young people who remain in the village, where they are considered dependents in their parents' households. Rural youth make merit by attending temple festivals and other ritual events, just as they have in past, but the responsibility and control over material resources that migrants demonstrate in the course of these merit-making trips are qualities normally exercised by their parents and grandparents (see Tambiah 1970; also Lefferts n.d.). Religious duties and daily support for the monks are tasks supervised and organized by community elders. Young women and men living in rural communities may help with preparations for major rituals, give food offerings to monks, and attend temple ceremonies, but they are not usually involved in the organization and planning of these events.<sup>30</sup> Young people in Bangkok who organize thoht phaa paa or other ceremonies and make sizable contributions out of their own pocket are thus engaging in activities that, in the village setting, are quite unusual for people of their age and social status.

Furthermore, the number of participants from outside the home village and the substantial monetary offerings are not features common of most village ceremonies. Many aspects of these excursions from Bangkok—the long distance traveled, the participants from many different parts of the country, the drama, and (at least potentially) the large sums of money donated—are strongly reminiscent of the prestigious ritual offerings that wealthy patrons and ambitious politicians sponsor, usually at famous temples in Bangkok and provincial towns. Although none

of my informants made this connection explicitly, it seems likely that part of the attraction of merit-making trips for young villagers lies in this vicarious association with the elaborate style of merit offerings practiced by the powerful and wealthy, groups to whom migrants and their families must defer in everyday life.

In a variety of ways, migrants' sense of self as up-to-date or modern is denied or marginalized within the dominant Bangkok culture; moreover, by pursuing styles and standards of urban commodity consumption, women can quickly diminish their ability to make the economic contributions that are expected of them by people at home and that the women themselves acknowledge as their responsibility. Viewed from one perspective, the merit-making trips discussed above might simply demonstrate the extent to which hegemonic discourses of modernity increasingly permeate the understandings and practices of subordinate groups in Thailand, but this would only be a partial reading. By organizing and participating in ceremonial offerings, young rural women are able to affirm their connections with kin and community while also demonstrating their claims to personal autonomy and material success before an appreciative audience—perhaps the only such audience available to them. Seen within the broader context of women's migration experiences of and participation in urban employment and consumerism, merit-making trips emerge as an important cultural arena in which migrant workers find room to maneuver despite the structural and ideological constraints they face in everyday life. Merit-making trips allow village youths to assert some of the social authority and prestige that they had hoped to gain through migration to Bangkok but that is denied to all such proletarian wage-earners. By mobilizing the signs and symbols of a *than samay* identity within the conventions of these Buddhist rituals, young migrants contest—if only in veiled and temporary fashion—their material and ideological marginalization within the dominant, urban society.

## **conclusion**

In this article I have focused on what can be learned about women's experiences as labor migrants in Thailand through their consumption practices. Commodity consumption is a central goal in migration decisions and an important feature of the urban sojourn. Migrants' consumption is not simply a reflection of material interests or economic need but is also a cultural process, engaging powerful if often conflicting cultural discourses about family relations, gender roles, and Thai constructions of modernity. Urban consumption practices are constitutive of young migrants' sense of themselves as modern women, but the latter is sharply constrained both by women's lived experiences of Bangkok employment and by cultural expectations and personal desires linked to rural kin and community. As a result, market commodities and commodified forms of social practice serve as important vehicles for the construction and contestation of identity. Attention to workers' commodity consumption points not only to some of the cultural conflicts involved in labor migration but also to an important arena wherein women can mobilize dominant symbols and meanings to serve their own interests and to stretch, if only temporarily, the limits of their subordination within the wider society.

This highlights the importance of examining the specific and culturally contingent motivations—or, to return to Enloe's phrase, "needs, values, and worries"—that help to shape local participation in and lived experiences of new relations of production and authority. As the dramatic rates of women's entry into proletarian labor gains ever more attention worldwide, it is important to ask, at different places and times, how women's own desires and concerns may complement or conflict with the expectations and interests of both capitalist employers and workers' families and home communities. The answers can point not only to the kinds of tension that neophyte wage laborers will probably confront but also to the spaces that may exist for negotiating and reworking their new circumstances. While my argument relates most specifi-

cally to the experiences of young Thai women involved in rural-urban labor migration, it holds broader implications for the study of newly proletarianized groups both in Thailand and more generally within the contemporary global economy. At the very least, sustained attention to the processes and meanings of consumption practices broadens the framework of analysis and may permit more complete and complex understandings of contemporary cultural and economic transformation in different situations and societies around the world. In the analysis of local encounters with capitalism, it is important to see how new structural relations are actively received and even appropriated by people on the ground. As Orlove and Rutz have argued, attention to the complex agency underlying consumption practices, beliefs, and motivations can help avoid reductionist views of social and cultural transformation and may provide a richer and more complete understanding of local experiences of change (1989:6, 14–15). In different parts of the world, popular confrontations and resistance to wage labor and commodity markets exist alongside the rapid—and even enthusiastic—incorporation of capitalist forms and relations into daily life. Examining specific consumption patterns may illuminate how and why local responses to global processes vary. It thereby becomes clear that “consumption . . . can powerfully affirm certain social orders and can be a key arena of contestation and change of others . . . consumption is thus linked to the constitution and transformation of hegemony” (Orlove and Rutz 1989:39).

In contemporary Thailand, the gap between hegemonic cultural constructions of urban modernity and lived experiences of city life sets up a fundamental tension in the daily lives of rural-urban migrants. Young women moving into Bangkok confront seductive images of consumption-oriented lifestyles, yet their ability to achieve these desired than samay standards are constrained by their low-wage, low-status employment. Rural-urban mobility brings young women into the heart of Thai modernity, but working and living in Bangkok merely confirms their marginalization, not only as subordinate employees but also—what is just as important to many migrants—within the urban consumer culture. These encounters with new forms of domination and hegemonic representations, and the gaps between dominant meanings and lived experience that they must face as a result, offer fertile ground for migrants’ “cultural struggles” (Ong 1991). In the course of moving between rural and urban settings, young Thai women must negotiate not only shifts in space but also shifting identities and social relations. Women’s labor and women’s bodies constitute crucial factors of economic production. They are also evocative symbolic resources in present-day Thailand. Women’s labor, a cheap and highly flexible labor force mobilized through rural-urban migration, has been a key component in Thailand’s recent economic boom. But while the Thai media celebrate national progress and modernity, including the symbolic deployment of women’s mobile and commodified bodies, young migrants encounter these images as seductive but largely unattainable, potential selves. In this context, rural-urban mobility must be recognized as more than a strategy for economic survival or accumulation; it is also a vehicle through which migrants struggle over what it means to be modern in contemporary Thai society and attempt to reconcile these aspirations and images with equally compelling concerns for, and moral commitments to, rural kin and community.

In the midst of these structural and ideological contradictions, it is little wonder that women should experience the movement into urban employment in highly ambivalent ways. Nevertheless, this ambivalence cannot be taken as passivity or as a failure to recognize the inequities they encounter. Throughout their time in the city, young women make very real efforts to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose despite the many difficulties they face. Young women in Bangkok are often torn between duty and affection for rural kin on the one hand and personal desires for autonomy and urban adventure on the other. The choices they make, however, are shaped not only by the structural disparities of the contemporary Thai and global political

economy but also by the cultural resources that are available to them—resources through which they seek to understand who they are and who they wish to become.

## notes

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1. *Khem* is a pseudonym, as are the names of all informants cited in the text. Her statement is translated from a short autobiographical narrative that she wrote during the time I was interviewing her in 1987–88. Parts of it have been published in the monthly newsletter of Friends of Women, a Thai women's rights organization. See Friends of Women 1988.

2. Thailand's National Statistical Office (NSO 1992:38) reported that between 1990 and 1992 more than 272,000 women and 281,000 men moved from rural to urban areas, while 1,149,000 people (of whom 41% were women) moved in the opposite direction. The excess of urban-rural over rural-urban moves in this report reflects the timing of the survey (i.e., conducted from September to November, the months leading into the main rice harvest of the year). Given the difficulty of counting the variety of temporary and circulating moves that characterize most rural-urban mobility in Thailand, these figures probably underestimate the full extent of population movement.

3. Thus, for example, men and women working in Bangkok may receive supplements of rice, other foods, and even cash from rural households; children born to urban workers are frequently sent home to be raised by grandparents or other kin in the countryside; and rural households provide care and support to migrant members in cases of illness, unemployment, or other crises they may encounter while working in the city.

4. For a recent review of the literature on this topic, see Ong 1991. Useful case studies from Asia to Africa to Latin America and the Caribbean include Beneri and Feldman 1992, Fernandez-Kelly 1982, Kung 1983, Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Ong 1987, Safa 1995.

5. There is an extensive literature on rural-urban labor migration in Thailand. For the most part this research has focused on demographic and economic policy-oriented questions of identifying population flows (and determining whether they can or cannot be redirected away from Bangkok), patterns of urban assimilation, or the economic impact of remittances on rural households (see, for example, Aphichat et al. 1979; Fuller et al. 1983; Goldstein and Goldstein 1986; Lightfoot et al. 1983; Parnwell 1986; Pawadee 1984; Porpora and Lim 1987). Relatively little of this work has taken an anthropological perspective, although notable exceptions include Anchalee 1981; Juree 1983; Muecke 1984, 1992; and Textor 1961. For a more extensive review of this literature see Mills 1993:234–244.

6. For a more general discussion of the place—or dearth until recently—of consumption studies in anthropology as a whole, see also Miller 1995.

7. This phenomenon is not unique to Thailand; similar effects operate in societies around the world. Arjun Appadurai, in particular, has identified the rise of such “global cultural processes” with a transformation of the social imagination:

[T]he imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and a culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (“individuals”) and globally defined fields of possibility. . . . The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. [Appadurai 1990:5]

While any claims for the human imagination as a fundamentally new component in social creativity can easily be overdrawn, the new and increasingly global technologies of mass communication have certainly had important and wide-reaching effects on how people think about themselves and the world around them. For a useful application of these ideas see Steven Kemper's (1993) reading of Appadurai in relation to the social production of a national(ist) imagination in Sri Lanka through the practice of new forms of mass consumption such as lotteries.

8. Moore argues that such “fantasies of identity,” because they are “linked to fantasies of power and agency in the world” (1994:66), play a significant role in the way individuals confront and potentially transform existing social discourses about appropriate roles and (gendered) identities.

9. The extent to which Thai women do in fact enjoy a high social status has been the subject of considerable debate. See, for example, Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1982, 1985; Van Esterik 1982.

10. Roseberry's work is informed by the seminal insights of Raymond Williams (1977), specifically Williams's concept of "structures of feeling" arising from the interplay between dominant cultural constructions and alternative understandings (i.e., "residual" or historically rooted and traditional meanings, and "emergent" or new and innovative ideas) that exist within and can potentially challenge hegemonic cultural formations (Williams 1977:121–135).

11. Such an analysis need not apply only to women's newly industrialized labor but can also illuminate experiences of cultural disjuncture and contests over dominant meanings more generally. See, for example, Mills 1995 and Rouse 1992.

12. These concerns about the study of consumption echo recent calls for more complex and nuanced approaches to the analysis of hegemony and resistance in anthropology as a whole. See Ortner 1995 for one of the most current contributions on this subject.

13. An interest in the constitution of Thai modernity is also an underlying theme in academic debates, especially those on the social, political, and economic transformations involved in the construction of the modern Thai nation-state. For early "modernization" studies see, for example, Jacobs 1971 and Riggs 1966; for more recent anthropological and historical analyses, see Keyes 1989 and Thongchai 1994.

14. Similarly, Juree Vichit-Vadakan (Juree 1983) observed that young people migrating to Bangkok did so for economic purposes but also, and just as importantly, for the experience of modern, urban comforts and excitement; this, she argued, is a factor working against policy attempts to redirect migration toward less developed (and less glamorous) regional centers.

15. Prostitution is not new in Thailand. The country's present-day sex industry, however, is connected to the more respectable marketing of modern female beauty in many ways—not only by a shared imagery of the commodified female body. For instance, popular beauty contests are commonly believed to be arenas for recruiting high-class escort and call girl services. Indeed recent research indicates that some women in the sex industry enter and continue their work at least partly because of its particular opportunities for economic autonomy, including modern display and accumulation (e.g., Lyttleton 1994:267). Although the strength of such considerations for women in commercial sex work vary widely (Lyttleton 1994:272–276), the linkages between prostitution and notions of modern womanhood remain problematic for migrants in other occupations and within the wider society. For the industrial laborers with whom I have worked the stigma associated with prostitution still carries considerable force. No migrants I met who were not themselves sex workers viewed sex work as a desirable option. Awareness of AIDS remains relatively limited among most migrants; as public education campaigns increasingly identify the disease with prostitution, however, common assessments of the risks involved in sex work are not likely to decline. For analyses of the cultural contradictions that frame the experiences of some women sex workers in Thailand, see Lyttleton 1994 and Muecke 1992.

16. Urban employment and the separation from parental and community supervision that this entails suggest a degree of personal autonomy for young women that is potentially greater even than what they can hope to experience later in life as mothers, and without the burdens and sacrifices that motherhood entails. Although the relative status of women in Thai Buddhist culture has been the focus of some debate, few would deny that motherhood has historically been an important—if not the primary—basis for women's status and decision-making authority within rural households (see Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1985; Van Esterik 1982). Labor migration offers young unmarried women a degree of independence and physical mobility to which few can aspire should they remain in their parents' home. Muecke (1984) found similar patterns at work among Northern Thai women involved in construction labor; she argued that cash earnings were replacing maternity as their main source of social value.

17. It is important to note that workers' enjoyment of "up-to-date" styles and events associated with the workplace makes these potentially useful to management as strategies for structuring worker morale, an informal means of labor control. But these events can occasionally have rather different effects. The distribution of uniforms and hosting competitions and banquets may be represented by management as a gift or act of patronage toward employees, but the same acts can be perceived as rights or benefits owed and therefore become points for contestation. For example, in 1987 I met one young woman who had participated in a confrontation with her employer because she wanted the factory to institute a system of uniforms. In another example, one male worker was moved to consider union membership after he was reprimanded and fined for wearing a company soccer team shirt on the shop floor.

18. Bangkok minimum wage rose to 110 baht (U.S.\$4.40) as of 1994; somewhat lower rates apply in some other regions of the country.

19. In some cases legal loopholes may support the payment of lower wages; in others, wage laws are simply ignored. The inequities of urban employment are exacerbated by the fact that many of the jobs women find in Bangkok, such as those available in small-scale sweatshop operations and domestic service, receive limited protection under Thai labor laws. Even so, industrial jobs are among the best paid employment available to rural women. Servants' wages are generally the lowest, even when free room and board are counted. A 1980 survey of northeastern women working in Bangkok found that domestic servants earned a mean monthly income, including payments in kind, of 800 baht or U.S.\$32 while those with factory jobs averaged 1,200 baht (U.S.\$48) per month (Pawadee 1982:103). While similar survey data on income in the late 1980s and early 1990s is unavailable, anecdotal reports by migrants indicate that domestic service remains very poorly paid. The greatest earning potential for migrants is often in the sex trade, although this

also depends upon highly variable working conditions, from relatively autonomous enterprise to virtual slave labor (see Truong 1990:185–188).

20. Many migrant women actively seek overtime. Given low base wages, overtime hours are often the only way to earn enough to cover their living expenses while also saving money to send home or purchase valued commodity items.

21. These conventional “child of the fields” (*luuk thung*) and ethnic Lao-Northeast Thai (*moh lam*) singing styles have become major genres of popular entertainment in Thailand’s highly commercialized media industries.

22. In addition to occasional industrial homework of this sort, some migrant workers attempt to earn extra income through small-scale sales activities—for example, purchasing goods (e.g., jeans or tee-shirts) at Bangkok wholesale markets for resale to friends and coworkers or becoming agents for pyramid sales outfits (e.g., Avon, Amway), which are increasingly common in urban Thailand. Relatively few of the women I interviewed engaged in these practices, preferring whenever possible to work overtime at their regular factory job. Nevertheless, the fact that these retail enterprises are seen as viable options for some migrants indicates the extent to which ongoing, if small-scale, commodity purchases are an important part of the everyday setting for urban workers.

23. Food is a basic consumption need and not all meals involve peer-based sociality. The extent to which migrants engage in these meals—often featuring special regional cuisines, seasonal fruits, ready-made sweets and soft drinks consumed either in local food shops or purchased in the market and taken back to be served in workers’ lodgings—is striking. They do so even when living in factory dormitories where all or part of their daily meals are provided by the employer. In part this may reflect on the quality of food provided and the often limited cafeteria hours, but group outings to markets and restaurants are also important and enjoyable social occasions.

24. Of course not all leisure time is spent on such outings. Many migrants spend much of their time off doing laundry and other chores and generally resting. Resting, however, often includes visiting with friends, chatting or watching television, and perhaps sharing a meal, activities that incorporate aspects of more elaborate consumption-oriented thiaws.

25. This finding parallels that of Anchalee Singhanetra-Renard (1981) with respect to out-migration from a northern Thai community. She observed that villagers did not measure the strength of continuing community membership by the distance or time period of a move but by the degree to which mobile individuals maintained their economic and social ties through visits, remittances, and ceremonial donations.

26. Their perceptions parallel Suzanne Thorbek’s analysis of women’s lives in a Bangkok slum. She points out that urban women’s economic vulnerability is rooted in the transformation of the household division of labor by gender. While rural income and daily reproduction are generated in large part through cooperative household activities, urban income is earned outside the household through wage work. Men have greater access to such employment than do married women, especially when the latter cannot leave the home for long periods because of childcare responsibilities or for fear of theft (Thorbek 1987:61).

27. When I returned to Thailand for a brief visit in 1993, I found that Noi was married and pregnant with her first child. She was still living in Bangkok but was going to return to her home village “to become a *mae baan* [housewife]” a few weeks before her delivery. Her husband, however, was not the fiancé of three years earlier; Noi had successfully avoided that match by remaining in Bangkok without returning home for over a year, until the young man and his family gave up and withdrew their offer. Instead she had married another man from her village, a successful overseas contract laborer. They lived together for about a year and then he made plans to go on a new work contract to Taiwan. Noi confided that he was not her romantic ideal but that she liked him well enough. “And anyway,” she said, “it’s better to marry the one who loves you [rather than the one you love].” Moreover his own past travels made him sympathetic to Noi’s urban experiences, while his absence abroad would now give her considerable day-to-day autonomy in his absence.

28. Interestingly, very few migrant women I met participated in “share games,” a kind of informal credit circle. These are prevalent in many parts of urban Thailand and are an important mechanism for saving among industrial workers in other parts of the region (e.g., Wolf 1992:188–189). Several women mentioned fear of being cheated if the share game organizer could not keep control of the participants. Migrants were most likely to accumulate savings in the form of gold jewelry or bank accounts.

29. In fact, few of the migrants I knew made regular monthly remittances to village families. Those who did were usually working to support a child left at home in the care of grandparents.

30. Rural youths often look forward to Buddhist ceremonies and festivals, although, as for many migrants, this is frequently less from religious devotion than because these occasions have historically been opportunities for young people to mingle more or less freely and perhaps meet lovers or potential suitors.

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