

J I E M I N   B A O

# MARITAL ACTS

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND IDENTITY  
AMONG THE CHINESE THAI DIASPORA



# MARITAL ACTS

Gender, Sexuality, and Identity  
among the Chinese Thai Diaspora

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To my beloved parents

I occasionally experience myself as cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally, yet without one central theme. . . . With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.

—EDWARD SAID, *Out of Place*

# Language Conventions

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CHINESE AND THAI terms are sprinkled throughout the text. I use the symbol [M] to distinguish Mandarin from Thai; for Mandarin I use phonetic transcriptions of Chinese characters. For Thai, I follow the system in *Romanization Guide for Thai Script*, except for terms that are in common usage such as “Teochiu.” When a word or term is expressed in both Thai and Mandarin, I translate the Thai first, followed by the Mandarin; for example, “blood” (*luat/xuetong* [M]).

Thai sources are cited in the text and listed in the bibliography by the author’s first name.

## Preface

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I OFTEN FIND myself living in one place and longing for something in another. For example, I seldom enjoy Thanksgiving or Christmas in the United States because it makes me homesick for my family in China. In 1999, after twelve years of living abroad, I came back to Shanghai to visit my family for Chinese New Year. On New Year's Eve—and at midnight on the fourth day of the New Year (when people welcome the Money God)—the constant din of fireworks was so loud that even inside the house I had to shout to make myself heard, and the air outside was so full of smoke that we dared not open the windows.

In the morning our street was a vast red carpet of spent firecrackers. The New Year's celebration was more commercialized and far noisier than what I remembered. I found my mind drifting back to a Thai New Year's celebration (the *Songkran* water festival) with my old friend Ming Mama and her family in Chiang Mai in 1992. Ming Mama's children, grandchildren, and I all piled into the bed of an old pickup truck with a big barrel of water. We crept through the streets flinging water on everyone we met and getting thoroughly drenched ourselves. The water symbolized purification, "washing away bad things." I had great fun. With the temperature over 100 degrees, it felt good to get soaked. It made me feel like a kid again, in a way that the New Year in Shanghai somehow had not. Maybe nostalgia has distorted my memory, or maybe China is simply changing too fast. Or maybe both. I know I've changed, and am changing still.

In the summer of 1988—just nine months after I left Beijing to come to the United States to do graduate work at UC-Berkeley—I joined a Study Abroad Program and traveled to Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand. When introduced to people of Chinese ancestry in Thailand, I was astonished to discover that some did not consider me a "real Chinese" because I had grown up in "communist China." They reasoned that since Mao's regime had attempted to destroy all "Chinese traditions," anyone who had grown up during that time would be ignorant of "real" Chinese culture. Along with two of her friends, Ming Mama, who had immigrated from

Shantou, China, more than fifty years earlier, tested me: I was asked to read a classical Chinese poem and explain its meaning to them. Until I passed that test, I had been treated courteously but kept at a distance. Before coming to Thailand, it had never occurred to me that I would not be perceived as Chinese. I was also surprised to find that, contrary to what I had read, the Chinese Thai whom I encountered had not been “assimilated.” I began to ask myself: what does it mean to be Chinese outside of China?

At that time, studying identity formation among ethnic Chinese in Thailand was politically sensitive. In Berkeley I once met Thailand’s former minister of foreign affairs and asked him a question about Thailand’s ethnic Chinese. Without bothering to sound diplomatic, he responded bluntly, “There are no Chinese in Thailand.” Researching the formation of Chinese identity was even more delicate in my case because I held a Chinese passport and could be accused of working for “communist China.”

While my interest in Chinese Thai identity was just awakening, I had long been interested in issues of gender inequality. Growing up under Mao, my training had been to think about all relationships in terms of class. I remember reciting Chairman Mao’s teaching: “class struggle must be talked every year, every month, and every day.” As I grew older, I came to realize that gender inequality could not be explained by class alone, for inequality exists between and among men and women who share the same class status. So I decided that marriage, where so many aspects of identity actually intersect and which was also considered a “safe” anthropological issue, would be my official topic. Using this strategy, I eventually became the first Chinese scholar granted permission to conduct research on the ethnic Chinese in Thailand.

The stories that the Chinese Thai told me are deeply informed by hybridity, gender inequality, and ambiguity. Ming Mama, for example, considered herself “very Chinese,” but she loved to wear a Thai sarong after her bath, and her food was often a combination of Thai and Chinese cuisine. She urged her children to marry someone Chinese, but she got along well with her Thai daughter-in-law. She complained about her womanizing husband—she cried so much that she had ruined her eyes—but she never wanted to divorce him. Her Chinese-ness and her everyday activities were filled with contradictions.

Since living and working outside of China, I have personally experienced the ambiguity of being Chinese. In the summer of 1991, after living in Berkeley for four years, I went back to Shanghai for the first time to visit my family. My five-year-old nephew, Sunsun, called me “American Auntie,”



because all he could remember about me was that I lived in the United States. “No, I am not your American Auntie,” I corrected him. “Call me Auntie.” This reminded me that a white American friend in Berkeley had advised me to change my name to Jasmine, because Jasmine corresponds to a feminine image and Jiemin is too difficult to pronounce. But for me Jasmine is an alien social marker, whereas Jiemin is part of my cultural identity. I have taught those few who have asked how to pronounce Jiemin correctly to say it with an English inflection, because the Chinese tone is just too hard for most English speakers to hear and replicate. But occasionally I miss the sense of affection and intimacy I feel when my family and Chinese friends say my name. Thus when I hear the word Jiemin, I enter a diasporic space in which I become aware of the speaker’s own cultural background.

Now whenever I visit Shanghai my younger sister, Sansan, always teases me about my out-of-fashion clothing, calling me “the American farmer’s daughter.” In the winter of 1999 my mom got very upset with me when I wore my old handmade Laotian scarf instead of her new one. “In all of Shanghai,” she said, “no one but you would wear such an ugly farmer’s scarf.” So “the farmer’s daughter” has become my family nickname. I gradually came to realize that my cultural taste had changed, and it was colliding with a Chinese notion of modernity. Finally, to keep from distressing them, I learned to dress according to local standards—just as I did during my fieldwork. It was a small concession in the larger process of negotiation.

Writing in English is where I feel my cultural displacement most keenly. Writing in Chinese is like peeling an onion: you begin with the general, work toward the specific, and finally reveal the key argument toward the end. In English, I need to reverse the order. As I was taught in graduate school, “You have to sell yourself immediately in the first paragraph”—a phrase that comes from the heart of capitalism.

As a scholar living in the United States, I have the freedom to choose my topic and to conduct my own research. But my choices are still disciplined by grant money, by the sensitivity of the research topic, by university politics, and so on. Moreover, “you need to write a book to get tenure.” In a capitalist society, productivity is greatly emphasized, whether you are a farmer or a professor, and I cannot escape being disciplined by capitalist institutions. I am conforming to these politics, and I am writing this in English instead of Chinese or Thai, which would be more relevant for the people who shared their stories with me. All of these experiences have led me to agree with Ien Ang’s contention that Chinese-ness “is a category whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and

rearticulated, both inside and outside China" (1993:5). Writing about diasporic Chinese Thai cultural identities and gender inequality, at least for me, is a political act.

While conducting research in Thailand, my personal background and ambiguous identity elicited great curiosity and many questions. Some people treated me as being similar to them: a Chinese person living outside of China. Some thought themselves "more Chinese" than I when I confessed that I never practiced ancestor worship. Some thought I was trustworthy partly because I was from China; others were suspicious of my motives because I was from "Red China" (*chindaeng*). Many were curious about my personal life, especially with regard to what country I would choose to settle in, and what sort of person I would marry. The questions they asked and the assumptions they made gave me insight into what they meant by Chinese and Thai in various contexts and revealed how our different views were informed by our own particular experiences.

My research activities were also shaped by gender expectations in Bangkok. Although I did interview a few women in coffee shops and restaurants, most were so busy that they preferred being interviewed in their homes or their shops, where they could keep doing their work and avoid dealing with Bangkok's notorious traffic. Men preferred being interviewed away from home—in restaurants, coffee shops, or their offices. Except in cases where I knew both wife and husband, I rarely telephoned a man at home, where his wife could imagine that he was involved with "another woman." Thus I contacted the men at work, unless they worked at home in family businesses. I never had this kind of concern when I called the women. My own uneasiness about where and how to contact the men illustrates how, in a very short period of time, my thinking was influenced by local gender-specific concerns.

During conversations with me about the commercial sex industry or polygyny, some Chinese Thai men emphasized their masculine prowess, assuming an appreciative female audience. In contrast, women appreciated me as a sympathetic listener when they talked about their husband's or father's extramarital sexual activities. In general, I found that women talked more easily about men's extramarital sexual activities than their own.

My fieldwork in Thailand was conducted during the summer of 1988, between July 1991 and June 1992, for a month in 1996, and four weeks in December 2002 and January 2003. In all, I interviewed over one hundred people, including *chinkao*, the first generation (lit., "old Chinese," now used

to refer to Chinese who immigrated to Thailand before 1949); *lukchin*, the second generation (lit., “Chinese children”); *lukkbrung* (“half-Chinese”); and undocumented immigrant Chinese women newly arrived in Bangkok. In this book, I use material from forty extensive life histories compiled from in-depth interviews with seventeen chinkao and twenty-three lukchin, and I also draw upon interviews, gossip, and other stories elicited from family members, domestic workers, neighbors, and friends.

Most chinkao speak Teochiu, a southern Chinese dialect that I do not understand. All of them can speak some Thai, but often not enough to express themselves with the clarity and subtlety they wanted, so we conversed in Mandarin. In the emigrant regions before 1949, Mandarin was regarded as the intellectuals’ language. In Thailand, chinkao who speak Mandarin usually have had more formal education or were motivated enough to learn the language on their own. Therefore, the ability to speak Mandarin became an indicator of class status among chinkao.

When I interviewed lukchin, we spoke Thai, Mandarin, English, or Lao. Sometimes we used three or four different languages in a single interview. For example, Phi Pasuk spoke Mandarin when recalling her childhood, but switched to English, her professional language, when we talked about sexuality. When referring to Thai Buddhist practices or ethnic stereotypes, she mixed in Thai and Teochiu expressions. The ease with which she switched languages highlighted the deep sense of hybrid identity felt by many lukchin.

In addition to conducting interviews, I lived with three different families between 1991 and 1992, altogether for a total of more than six months. I observed and participated in their daily activities, such as birthday parties, ancestor worship, weddings, funerals, and evening gatherings. This first-hand experience enabled me to see how individuals play with dominant ideologies and negotiate cultural rules in a rich variety of contexts.

To better understand the chinkao, I twice traveled to emigrant areas in southern China to trace chinkao roots and to get a sense of the effects of southern peasant culture on the Chinese Thai. I also surveyed 102 chinkao and lukchin households (with a total population of 921). While conducting the survey I discovered that some chinkao counted only sons when asked how many children they had. Subsequently I asked for the exact number of daughters and sons. The survey information—on marital choices and practice, ethnic identities, residence patterns, the division of labor, occupations, education, religious beliefs, and notions of a “good” wife and husband—

provided abundant information about the diversity and complexity of the Chinese communities in Bangkok, which I have used mainly as a background reference for this book.

My research on Chinese Thai Americans began with my connections to Thai and Chinese Thai American communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. The more I wrote about the *chinkao* and *lukchin*, the more I wanted to understand Chinese Thai Americans. I gradually came to realize that the process of identity formation among Chinese Thai Americans is a continuation of a cultural struggle that began in Thailand.

Between 1994 and 1998 I conducted thirty-seven life history interviews and dozens of nonsystematic interviews with Thai and Chinese Thai Americans in the Bay Area. My knowledge of Thailand and China and my ability to speak Thai and Lao were appreciated and taken to mean that I was serious about the project. A Thai Buddhist abbot sometimes introduced me by saying, “Khun Latsami [my Thai name] is Chinese, but in a previous life she was Thai.” On other occasions he introduced me as “Dr. Jiemin Bao.” His introductions gave me an insight into how he used his religious authority or my social capital to initiate my contact with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

People I interviewed in the Bay Area included transnational capitalists, restaurant owners, professionals, monks, Americans who married or dated Thai, college students, and primary school students. Almost all of the people I interviewed have had remarkable transnational experiences. The abbot, for example, grew up in rural northeastern Thailand, studied Buddhism first in Bangkok and then in India, and later served as a monk in several temples in Thailand and the United States before finally being elected abbot at a Thai temple in the Bay Area. At the end of this book, I include only a small fraction of the stories told by the Chinese Thai Americans in this project. But that will be enough, I hope, to enable us to reconsider the ethnic Chinese experience in Thailand in a different light, from a new angle of vision.

# Acknowledgments

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LIKE MILLIONS OF other students, during the Cultural Revolution I was sent to the countryside—in my case to Heilongjiang Province, China’s Siberia—to be “reeducated by peasants.” Before I left, my grandmother gave me a good-luck charm: a small brown bottle filled with Shanghai soil. She believed that by carrying some native soil with me, I would more easily adapt to rural life and stay healthy. Grandma, I miss you and often think about how you opened my eyes to the meanings inscribed in people, migration, and homes.

Since this book is one product of a long journey that began in China, moved on to Thailand, and continues to this day in the United States, I owe many debts of appreciation for the guidance and assistance I have been given along the way. First, I would like to thank Robert Reed and Herbert Phillips for their support and encouragement. I am especially grateful to Aihwa Ong, my mentor, for her remarkable intellectual energy and for her guidance and care. Without her as an inspiration and a steadfast source of new ideas, this book would never have been written.

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The debt I feel most personally goes to the women and men I interviewed in Thailand, China, and the San Francisco Bay Area, for allowing me into their families and their lives. Without their stories, their tears, and their laughter—and many delicious meals—this book would not have been possible. To preserve the ethics of this research, they must go unnamed; but I am sure that those who can read English will recognize themselves when they see their own words and their stories told in the following pages. I write of their experiences with great sincerity and deep respect for the openness with which they addressed the issues discussed in this book, and I hope they will forgive my mistakes and any misrepresentations.

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# Contents

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*Language Conventions* · xi

*Preface* · xiii

*Acknowledgments* · xix

## Part I

### POSITIONS

1. Introduction · 3

2. The Ongoing Process of Identity Formation · 15

## Part II

### THE CHINKAO EXPERIENCE

3. The Gendered Politics of Migration and Marriage · 31

4. Middle-Class Chinese-ness, Nei/Wai Politics · 53

5. Changes in Sexual Practice: “Same Bed, Different Dreams” · 74

## Part III

### THE LUKCHIN EXPERIENCE

6. Hybrid Identities · 93

7. What’s in a Wedding? · 105

8. Naturalized Sexuality and Middle-Class Respectability · 125

9. *Shang Jia*: “Family Business” · 144

## Part IV

### THE CHINESE THAI AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

10. Multiple Belongings · 167

*Notes* · 191

*Glossary* · 201

*Bibliography* · 203

*Index* · 215



PART I

POSITIONS