



New Edition

# Travels in the Skin Trade

Tourism and the Sex Industry

REMY SEABROOK



# TRAVELS IN THE SKIN TRADE

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Tourism and the Sex Industry

SECOND EDITION

JEREMY SEABROOK

Pluto  Press  
LONDON • STERLING, VA.

First published 1996 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA  
and 22883 Quicksilver Drive, Sterling, Va 20166-2012, USA

Second Edition 2001

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 0 7453 1757 X hbk

ISBN 0 7453 1756 1 pbk

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Seabrook, Jeremy, 1939–  
Travels in the skin trade : tourism and the sex industry /  
Jeremy Seabrook

p. cm.

ISBN 0-7453-1757-X (hbk)

1. Sex oriented businesses—Thailand—Bangkok.

2. Sex tourism—Thailand—Bangkok. I. Title.

HQ242.55.B3S43 2001

306.74'09593—dc20 96-34398

CIP

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed, typeset and produced for Pluto Press by  
Chase Publishing Services, Fortescue, Sidmouth, EX10 9QG  
Printed in the European Union by  
TJ International, Padstow, England

TRAVELS IN THE SKIN TRADE

# Foreword

by

SIRIPORN SKROBANEK

Foundation for Women, Bangkok

Women in the sex industry in Thailand have been for a long time the object of international investigation, both by Western scholars and media people. Through their studies and reports, women in Thailand are viewed as 'the other women', whose status is perceived as lower than that of women in the West. Moral judgements, paternalistic attitudes towards Thai society in general, and Thai women in particular, are commonplace when one reads publications on this subject. Certainly there are elements in Thai society which contribute to the growth of commercialisation of human relationships, both in the family and community, and to the commodification of women's body and soul. But since there are two sides in a commercial transaction between foreign visitors and Thai women, why is only one party to the deal (Thai women and their society) the target of investigation, while the other party (the sex tourists) goes unexamined? It is more difficult to look into one's own heart than to impose one's own moral judgement on the people and culture of others.

Jeremy Seabrook is among the few who have accepted this challenge, and has painstakingly searched the soul of his fellow men, their motives and expectations in coming to the land of smiles. We learn from his research that they are not a homogeneous group, and from their own words, one can see a range of characters, from a heartbreaking man who needs to be pampered to a white master who wants to conquer.

The book is, therefore, not only about a sex industry in Thailand, but also a reflection of a human tragedy. Thailand is like a stage, where men from around the world come to perform their role of male supremacy over Thai women, and their white supremacy over Thai people. Through their own words, we see they do not want to learn about the people and culture, they just want to exploit the natural beauty and the female body.

The women in this book are not naive innocents, but human beings, capable of taking control of their life. They know how to play in this power game, where men want to dominate and are ready to place blame on anyone but themselves when things go wrong, or when anyone challenges their supremacy. As a Thai woman, it was painful to read between the lines, seeing the transactions in this 'virtual love', which ends so often in contempt and violence by the foreign men against Thai women. Many such relationships are nothing but a social pathology which they do not perceive. They tend to continue to divide women between the two cultures as 'the one who taught me to hate and the other who taught me to cry'.

Among all the exploitation and misunderstanding, however, Seabrook also shows us some more tender relationships between men and Thai women. Nevertheless, the question still arises: to what extent can such a relationship survive, based as it is on the man's naivete and the woman's survival strategy?

Another problem with prostitution in Thailand is that Western men need more than sexual services from Thai sex workers. They look for loving care, sincerity and honesty, which are not part of this power game and which they certainly do not expect in their home countries. The blame is again placed on the Thai women, who dare to make them realise the reality of the prostitution business.

Unlike other literature on this subject, Seabrook's work also voices the concerns and actions of various organisations and individuals working to ameliorate the problem of sex tourism, as well as to help women and children involved in the sex industry. From their own accounts, one can see that many Thai activists, female and male, have, in their various ways, the dream of a struggle to stop sexual exploitation of children and women in Thailand.

They link the sexual exploitation to the unjust and unequal structural relationships between rich and poor, man and woman, and between countries. They are also in search of a new development paradigm, as they realise that the existing one has devoured human relationships and spiritual dignity, and is making us all slaves of modern consumerism.

Seabrook has contributed to the study of the sex industry in Thailand. He has completed the jigsaw which allows us to see a fuller picture, not only of the sex industry of Thailand, but also of the increasingly instrumental nature of relationships between people in the West. The solution to international sexual exploitation lies, not only in changing the commercialised pattern of relationships in Thailand, but also those between the people of the West itself; for the sake of liberation, both for the exploited of Thailand, and for the whole of humanity.

Bangkok, July 1996

## PREFACE

This book is about the sex industry in Bangkok, the men who go there, the young women (and young men and children) who service them, the growing 'market' for sexual partners, and the people who are both resisting the sex trade and working to empower those within it. But it is also about human rights – some of them scarcely contentious, such as the rights of women and children not to be trafficked as commodities and not to be compelled or duped into prostitution, the right not to be abused or brutalised by the military or the forces of law and order.

It also raises the question of other rights which are more disputed, such as, for instance, the rights of rich males to get on an aircraft and travel across the world in order to exercise the power of their money over others. These infringements of the rights of others may be less obvious than the more overt brutalities of repression by governments, but they can be equally damaging to those on the receiving end of the actions of the powerful and to those who must live – or die – with the consequences.

Last but not least, the question of economic rights is addressed – the right to livelihood, the right to secure employment, the right not to depend upon prostitution as the only form of labour open to women. For all the civil and political rights which the West – quite properly – defends rest upon a more fundamental right, the right to life itself; without the right to grow peacefully, free from want and destitution which lead to malnutrition, avoidable illness and premature death, all other rights are cancelled.



In this way, the book argues for a more ample and generous interpretation of human rights than those presently acknowledged by the West. It does so by presenting the experiences and first-hand accounts of a wide section of those involved in the sex industry in Bangkok – clients, customers, women, children, activists, academics. It also contains suggestions for those who would like to help in the efforts and campaigns against the abuse of young women, men and children – particularly those presently being conducted by End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) and the Coalition Against Child Prostitution in the United Kingdom.

I have drawn upon the work of many people working with and on behalf of the sex workers of Thailand. I would like to make special mention of Riyoko Michinobu, whose unpublished thesis contains much useful historical material, of Sanphosit Koompraphant, Chris Macmahon of the Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights in Bangkok; I have quoted from *A Modern Form of Slavery*, published by the Asia Watch and Women's Rights Project. I am indebted for their insights and helpful contribution to Chantawipa Apisuk of EMPOWER, Siriporn Skrobanek of the Foundation for Women, Thanavadee Thajen of the Friends of Women, Sudarat Srisang of FACE and the members of End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism. I had originally compiled the interviews with male visitors to Bangkok for the Women's Groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as material that will illuminate for them something of the motives and the psyche of Western clients of sex workers in Thailand.

I would like to thank Julia O'Connell-Davidson and Jacqueline Marquez-Taylor of the University of Leicester for their work on sex tourism in the Caribbean and South America as well as Asia. I am grateful to Julia for her helpful criticism of the manuscript. I would like to acknowledge Anne Badger and Helen Veitch of the Coalition Against Child Prostitution, and give warmest thanks to Margaret Lynch and her colleagues at War on Want for their support and encouragement.

Jeremy Seabrook  
Bangkok/London  
June 1996

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Sex tourism has a peculiar poignancy, because the relationship between rich tourists and the sex workers they meet in Thailand, the Philippines, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, is one of the rare occasions when privilege confronts poverty face to face.

Sex tourism makes tangible a small part of a global relationship, whereby the rich depend to an increasing degree for their comfort and advantage on the labour of the poor. This relationship is usually perceived by the people of the West as the opposite of what it is: we, by means of aid, humanitarian assistance, loans and promotion of 'free trade', like to think we are contributing towards the 'development' of the poor.

This ensures that the global connections generally remain hidden, and our confidence in our fundamental goodness is not damaged. Who from the West ever seeks to make friends, for instance, with the half million young women in the garment industry of Dhaka, whose daily labour provides us with cheap shirts, jeans, trousers, jackets, blouses? We are not, on the whole, drawn to make acquaintances with the army of Chinese workers who provide most of the toys which make the eyes of our children shine on Christmas morning. Even less likely will we want to know anything of the conditions of work of those whose efforts supply us with luxury foods that make a mockery of season and climate – fruit and vegetables from Venezuela, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, the Ivory Coast, Brazil.

The global market effectively segregates producers and consumers, an unacknowledged apartheid, which conceals their lives and even their identities from each other.

This is why the sex industry is significant and symbolic. It is one of the few arenas where people from North and South come face to face. Surely, nothing more direct, immediate and inescapable could be imagined.

And yet, even these encounters are often characterised by lies, evasion and illusion. It should not be thought that the real relationship between rich and poor, clouded as it is in perpetual fog, should be dispelled by mere meetings of flesh and blood. And, in general, they are not.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. After all, sexual and emotional relationships are rarely governed by reason, clarity or common sense. The attachments that occur between sex workers and their clients from the West do not necessarily lead to deeper insights or understanding of the bonds which unite the destiny of the people of North and South.

Of course some individual relationships last. Some grow and develop into enduring friendship. Successful marriages also occur. On the other hand, for the casual tourist, these are brief meetings without consequences or tomorrows. But many foreigners find themselves enchanted, attracted by the apparently compliant, tender and welcoming ministrations of Thai sex workers. They become very attached, sometimes obsessed.

Their experience with Western sex workers has often been functional and mechanistic. When they meet Thai women, they are only too ready to believe they have found something special. The warm and affectionate sensibility makes men feel they have transcended the crude market transaction and found love. Men who have recently 'discovered' Thailand enthusiastically praise the superiority of Thai women over all others. This view of woman as nurturer and sensual Oriental embodies both sexist and racist stereotypes, but at this stage, the delighted client scarcely notices.

What he rarely realises is that there is almost certainly a network of extended family depending on the remittances of women who are, after all, sex workers. There may be children, elderly parents, aunts, uncles and cousins whose survival is guaranteed only by her earnings. Her period of high income is fragile and not durable. In this context, women learn to dissemble, to perform. The man readily believes he is loved for himself. 'There is no man on earth, no matter how repelling, arrogant and devoid of charm, who does not believe in his heart he is loveable', said one woman.

Only when demands for money increase, when he discovers that he is expected to help keep all the people concealed by the glow of his own desire, does his attitude change. When he finds

out there is a grandmother in urgent need of an operation, a brother to be put through school, a new roof to cover the rusty tin that no longer keeps out the rain from the village home, he becomes angry, upset, disillusioned. The feeling of generosity, that he is at least helping one poor family, turns to resentment. He starts to see himself – a man who can take flights across the world to take advantage of the cheap sexual services of poor women – as a victim. 'I have been conned, cheated, betrayed.' But a cultural crutch is at hand; and he reaches for other racial stereotypes that are always available to shore up the threatened psyche of privilege. 'You can't trust them.' 'You never know what they are thinking.' 'They're treacherous.' 'They can't be trusted.'

The second stereotype is implicit in the first. The Eastern woman as sensual and seductive becomes the scheming duplicitous whore. As Siriporn Skrobanek says 'In no other country do people expect to make long-term relationships with sex workers, let alone think of marrying them. So what is going on in their minds when they meet the women in the bars and clubs?'

The transnational sex industry is unique in that it makes visible the relationship between North and South, between privilege and oppression. But the connection does not always become clear to the actors in these dramas. The men often return to Europe, Australia or the US full of bitterness and anger. 'I gave her everything. She took me for a ride.' They become sour and self-pitying. The beneficiaries of the global system see themselves as abused innocents. The world is seen upside down through the prism of Western sensibility. They feel like victims.

In a deeper sense, of course, they are. For as they take their strange hungers with them on their travels, as they seek to assuage who knows what aches and absences in their lives by running to distant places for something so commonplace as sex, reassurance and tenderness, they are showing the limits of the rich market economies to answer many basic human needs. It is a strange paradox that they believe they will transcend this by rushing to find some exotic commodity unavailable on the home market; for in their flight from broken relationships, ruined marriages, spoiled loves, they find they have a rendezvous on the other side of the world with the same market system which offers them only different packaging and alternative selling strategies from those which they left behind.

Sex tourism offers the key to a deeper understanding of the nature of 'interdependence' in a global economy between profoundly unequal partners. It might have been thought that where the rich meet poor face to face, where flesh and blood establish some of the most intimate relationships human beings are capable of, this might open the eyes of some of the participants. That this rarely happens shows the power of ideologies of dominance and superiority, not in theory, but as they work themselves out in the world. Even when Western men have been compelled to revise some of their sexist convictions at home, as soon as they travel abroad, these readily spring back to life, reinforced by a racism which they have scarcely begun to question.

Jeremy Seabrook  
June 2000

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# 1

## SEX AS INDUSTRY

The sex industry of Bangkok is conspicuous, but embraces only a very small fraction of the population. The great majority of the people of Bangkok are employed in industry and construction, in workshops and factories, in hotels, shops, in the provision of food from street stalls and restaurants, in transport and tourism, in commerce, trade, in offices, in the law and education. There are scores of thousands of young women in the garments industry. Many of them work up to 15 or 16 hours a day; they live, eat and sleep in the 'row-house' factories where they work. They regularly send money home to their families and whole villages are sustained by their remittances. In shared rooms, photographs of their parents, brothers and sisters keep memories of home alive; a battered suitcase, some clothes, a mat for sleeping. Some, no doubt, find their way into the more lucrative employment of the bars or clubs, especially if a friend or acquaintance introduces them to it; but most women in the city remain untouched by the sex industry. The reputation of Bangkok as a sort of global brothel is both unjust and untrue.

In the last three years, I have spent many months in Bangkok, originally looking at migration, industrial workers and the process of urbanisation. Between September 1995 and March 1996 however, I concentrated more closely on the 'demand' side of the sex trade, at least in so far as this involves Western visitors, residents and tourists in the city. These categories are not always easy to distinguish and they merge into each other. Many who visit Thailand for the melancholy kind of 'fun' for which Bangkok has a somewhat exaggerated reputation, find they get hooked; or maybe enchanted. Many are drawn to come again and again. Some settle in Thailand, more or less permanently: sexpatriates.

The interactions reflected here address, for the most part, the longer-term involvement between Thais and Westerners, although there are accounts of more casual, transient visitors too. The contacts were made in a variety of ways – some through friends and acquaintances, some as direct interviews; but mainly, as encounters in bars, public places and clubs, often informally.

It is important to be aware of the limitations of such methods. For one thing, people are usually more ready to talk – particularly to strangers – about the breakdown of relationships, to dwell upon the causes of emotional and cultural incomprehension between Thai and foreigner, than they are to discuss successful, long-term attachments: these tend to celebrate themselves quietly, privately and rarely become the object of the same kind of morose introspection which follows separation or break-up. People who are disappointed or who feel that they have been deceived are more likely to express their frustrations. In that sense, these meetings and encounters cannot be said to be 'representative'. But in an attempt to reach some insight into the motives, responses and attitudes of foreign men in Bangkok, I have set out what I gained from 20 or so meetings in late 1995 and early 1996. These are mostly with Westerners (for linguistic reasons, it was not possible to speak with Japanese or Taiwanese, etc. although I did meet one or two Indians).

Some of these encounters are immensely touching: some illuminating, others pitiable, even repelling. The book does concentrate on the 'demand' side, because I wanted to discover what it is about the rich and envied societies of the West that impels so many people to travel across the world to look for experiences which are, presumably, not available to them at home. If I wanted to defend sex tourism – and there is no shortage of evidence on which to condemn it – I would perhaps quote the elderly American who said that he had never been touched by another human being for more than a quarter of a century until he came to Bangkok. When I quoted this example to some women in Britain, their response was 'Why couldn't he go to American sex workers?' They have a point, of course. The whole story of travelling abroad for sex implies that you can do things with foreigners that you cannot do at home, which is a racist assumption.



But it is also true that, on the whole, Western sex workers do not regard the giving of affection as part of the deal; and this distinction is less readily made in parts of the South.

The stories the people tell reveal something of the transactions between farangs (foreigners) and young Thai women and men. One of the original reasons for writing this book was to help Thai sex workers cope with the mysterious West, in the same way that those people who come to Thailand need to know much more than they do about the destination they choose; their fascination with an East, which frequently withholds its secrets, leaves them baffled and sometimes angry. The men who narrate their stories in this book are not representative of sex tourists: they are, for the most part, regular visitors to, or residents in, Thailand. This makes them untypical, but may have the advantage of explaining deeper Western responses and attitudes towards Thai women than the views of short-term sex tourists.

One thing that clearly draws Western men to Thai women is the perceived capacity of the women for what I can only describe as tenderness; a quality conspicuously absent from the sex industry in the West. Men feel particularly cherished by what they experience as the compliance, eagerness to please and considerateness of Thai women. Many compared such responses very favourably with the more mechanistic and functional behaviour of most Western sex workers. Just how far they are responding to an unchallenged indulgence in the power their money secures for them becomes clearer through their own words.

There is a pattern in the relationships between Thai women and foreigners who return again and again to Thailand. In the early stages of their contact with Thai women, the men tend to express the delight that comes from revelation – they describe themselves as being over the moon, being on cloud nine, walking on air and wondered what they have been doing, wasting their life until now. They rarely see that this idealisation of ‘Oriental’ women is as racist as the subsequent disillusionment. It is easy for them to forget, as Beth of EMPOWER (an NGO devoted to enabling sex workers to achieve greater equality with their clients, by teaching them their legal rights and health education, as well as providing language classes that help them negotiate with