

CHAPTER 3



EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF LIFE

What each partner brings to a marriage, inter-cultural or not, affects the pattern of their relationship. For inter-cultural marriages, in which one partner moves to live in the other's country, the affects are even more apparant and reveal cultural differences. As Kim notes in his study of intercultural adaptation, certain characteristics which immigrants bring with them, together with certain conditions of their stay, strongly influence the extent and nature of their associations with the host culture. (Kim 1989:277) Therefore, by looking at the social backgrounds and life expectations that these women brought with them to their marriage, and Thailand, we can see in later chapters how, if at all, these preconditions have affected, and/or been affected by their relationships and experiences in Thailand. Though the interviewees' expectations and perceptions of life and relationships can only be seen through their eyes, this bias is a revealing one, for the way these women see themselves determines the way in which they see, participate and adapt to their host culture - Thai society. Thus, in order to comprehend the life situations and experiences to be discussed in later chapters the difference in backgrounds and expectations between Thai and farang as well as between the generations, which form the underlying factors at play in these Thai-farang interactions, will be outlined as follows.

This chapter therefore will introduce the social backgrounds and preconceptions of the respondents and compare Thai and farang expectations of life and relationships. An outline of the farang women interviewed and their Thai husbands' life experiences before marriage will be given. Then interview information will be combined with additional examples from the questionnaires and readings to draw a comparison between Thai and farang expectations of marriage, as well as to discover the factors perceived to cause the greatest difficulties in cross-cultural marriage relationships in Thailand. Finally, a comparison of Thai and farang expectations of friendships will be drawn from the interview data and literature.

Social Backgrounds of Both Spouses

Some of the informants and literature (including Culture Shocked Marriages, Collins 1985, & Kitivipart 1987) have suggested that education, social and religious background, travel experience and independence of the spouses have an effect on the strength and stability of mixed-marriages. While the responses from the questionnaires and interviews have shown remarkable uniformity in most of these aspects, that these respondents are the 'survivors' may imply that a combination of these aspects facilitates a couple's experiences.

There was little age-generational difference between the women with regards to education, social background and religion. Indeed, The majority of all the women interviewed received at least 2 years further education, and came from middle-class small-town

backgrounds. Although the majority were brought-up as Christians, many were not practising and religion was cited as a source of individual strength for only a few (less than a quarter) of the women interviewed. Of those who claim to be religious, half shared the same faith as their husbands which they believe has led to greater understanding, and shared goals. That most of the women were not very religious coincides with Imamura's research which suggests that foreign women would have little confrontation or sense of self-betrayal in accepting their husbands' beliefs. All but one of the husbands are well-educated (two thirds with BA's from overseas), and most are Buddhists from an urban middle-class background. While the majority of men and women are from middle-class backgrounds, and educated to college level or higher the above outline simply suggests the kind of Farang women and Thai men that out-marry. In addition, it may also suggest that farang women and their Thai husbands from other social backgrounds and with lower education were either not interested in taking part in the survey or have divorced and/or are no longer living in Thailand.

However, one aspect of social background in which age-generational differences can be seen is that of the individual's life experience in terms of socio-economic independence from his/her family and travel experience before marriage.

Life Experience Before Marriage

Accounts from the interviewees and literature of farang women who have already left their husbands/Thailand, suggested that the most important variables affecting the men were their own economic and

social independence (from their families) and whether they worked for the government or family business as opposed to private business or being self-employed. Indeed, the majority of the older-generations' husbands worked for the government, and were socially and economically dependent on their families. In contrast, the majority of the new-comers' husbands work for international companies, and/or have their own businesses and are neither economically nor socially dependent on their families.

Age-generational differences were also found in the women's social background in terms of independence, travel experience and the opportunity to gain her own identity before meeting marriage and/or moving to Thailand. Half of the older-generation women were independent while less than half had travelled, compared to most of the new-comers who were independent and had had some travel experience before marriage. This highlights the greater opportunities available to women nowadays which it is suggested may give these women a better ability to adjust to their new environment. Many respondents mentioned that the women they know who had already left their husbands/Thailand were very young, with no independence, low education and no travel experience, and thus perhaps were less able to cope. As a total of two thirds of all the women interviewed were independent and well-educated, though less than half had had travel experience and as these women are the 'survivors', suggests that there may be some link between these variables and the success rates.

In addition to the above variables in social background, is the difference in cultural expectations of marriage and relationships which are brought to the cross-cultural marriage. The woman's preconceptions and

expectations of her life and new environment shape her responses and reactions to them. Her responses to and perceptions of reality will highlight areas of cultural differences in Thai and farang social and marriage expectations.

Expectations of Marriage

Although marriage patterns and male/female role expectations vary as much among the Thai, rural/urban and Thai/Chinese as they do among farang Americans/Europeans the following observations are of the general cultural differences between the broad categories of 'Thai' and 'farang' which have emerged from the questionnaires and interviews. Age-generational differences found in the interviews suggest that expectations of love and marriage relationships differ not only between Thai and farang cultures but also between the generations of Thai and farang, reflecting cultural changes in both societies.

Marriage expectations are significant factors involved in every marriage but it is the differences in Thai and farang expectations and the way in which the farang women married to Thai men perceive, accept and adjust to these differences that are significant in this thesis. By comparing questionnaire and interview responses with the readings, we will look at the women's perception of the differences between Thai and farang marriage expectations, as well as the women's perception of 'reality' in their relationships and any disappointments they may have had.

From the questionnaires, over half of the farang men and women said they had expectations of marriage

compared to only a third of Thai men and less than a quarter of Thai women. In contrast, more than half of all the farang women interviewed had expectations. Does this suggest that Thais (and Thai women in particular) have lower marriage expectations? Indeed, the general view of the literature notes that personal satisfaction within Thai marriage is regarded as a bonus rather than a right. "Expectations of what marriage would bring, in terms of interpersonal fulfillment, have been very low." (Kitivipart 1987:41) However, all the questionnaire respondents with expectations said they wanted friendship and partnership regardless of age, sex or nationality.

Farang vs Thai Expectations

Traditional Thai marriages are often described as placing importance on practical and financial considerations, and that a Thai woman seeks financial security and social status from her husband in return for making his life comfortable. In contrast, farang are generally believed to have an idealistic, romantic notion of love and whilst social class and economic background of a potential spouse would be taken into consideration, farang expect friendship and companionship from their spouses. Indeed, all of the farang women interviewed believed strongly in marriage for 'love'. However, as one American woman admitted, she had had too much of a romantic idea about love before she met her Thai husband and has since had to learn to be more realistic about how people have to work together and compromise. She suggests that perhaps the divorce rate is high in the US because people there have such an idealistic picture of love and marriage that no one could ever live up to, and many are not willing, or able; to adjust their

expectations. The farang women assumed that Thai women look for financial security, while farang look for emotional security in their marriage relationships. And although financial security is appreciated, the farang women believe that if a couple is emotionally secure, other (eg external and financial) problems can be dealt with together. How does this work in reality, and what effect do these different expectations have on the level of satisfaction in a relationship?

Perceptions of Reality

Many of the farang women interviewed said they expected friendship and partnership with their husbands and, 'to live happily ever after!' However, only half of the older-generation compared with over two thirds of the newcomers interviewed, said that they had a 'partnership' and shared a social life with their husbands. Even when their partners agreed on expectations, many couples discovered discrepancies between their role perceptions. As Imamura notes in her comparison of foreign wives of Japanese and Nigerian men, a common problem for them was also that,

she (the foreign wife) and her husband agreed that marriage was a partnership. Her version included the expectation that he would help her around the home and that he would discuss his work with her. His version assumed a partnership based on division of labor by gender: she would manage the home and he would not burden her with work-related problems. (Imamura 1990:177)

Indeed, this separation of roles was a major cause of disappointment cited by quite a few of the older-

generation women interviewed as will be seen later. Do expectations lead to disappointments?

Disappointments

From the questionnaires, just under half of the farang women, compared to only 1 Thai and 2 farang men admitted they had some disappointment with their married lives. The Thai females didn't say if they had any, and many people from all groups did not complete this section. This may suggest either that they had few disappointments or else that they would rather not express them.

Many of the older-generation women interviewed were disappointed due to the separation of male/female roles and social lives as noted above whereas the newcomers generally did not experience this situation. In addition, some of the older generation were disappointed that they could not be housewives, to stay home and take care of the children, but instead had to go out to work. Catherine who has been living in Thailand for 36 years expected, "To be a good supportive wife, have lots of children and stay at home to take care of everyone." However, she had to work to supplement her husband's income.

Women from both generations cited family interference as a major and unexpected disappointment. As Margaret says, "many farang wives did not realize and could not accept that their husband's primary responsibility would be to his family not to her," and many women are reported to have left their marriage/Thailand because of problems related to the

extended family. In fact, while family interference was the most common disappointment for the new-comers, the older-generation were disappointed by a combination of all the variables described above. This appears to suggest that while family interference is still a problem, cultural expectations and perceptions of male/female roles, partnership and working outside the home, are less different than in the past.

The fact that women of both generations shared similar marriage expectations, but that the majority of the older-generation with expectations had disappointments, compared with most of the new-comers with expectations who were satisfied with their relationship, suggests there have been social changes which have affected the variables involved. Meanwhile, other women who had no, or few expectations (or none that they could specify or remember) had no, or few disappointments, suggesting a correlation between expectations and satisfaction. Pat, who has been married 24 years, said that she had been taught not to expect too much in order to avoid disappointments and Betty, who has been married 18 years said, "We had no expectations, therefore no disappointments."

We can now see that the expectations of marriage that the women brought with them to their marriage were often different to reality. However, Diane believes that this is not necessarily unique to cross-cultural marriages but suggests that such differences in expectations are due to male/female differences rather than cultural ones. She said that her own parent's marriage and 'Victorian' values resemble the traditional expectations of Thai marriage, but as the Victorian values have changed, so too are Thai values changing as the degree and scope of disappointment experienced by the

new-comers would suggest. Whether there is simply a difference in male/female expectations or a difference between Thai-farang expectations, though it is quite likely a combination of both, would be an interesting question for future research. Nonetheless, the respondents' perceptions of reality will reveal the effect of their expectations upon their ability to adjust.

From the questionnaires, a third of farang men and a quarter of Thai women described their relationships as difficult, compared with half of the farang women, and three-quarters of the Thai women who described their marriages as happy. That Thai women might appear more satisfied may correspond with the fact that they also had lower expectations than farang women. However, as none of the men completed this section seems to suggest that men are reticent to consider or discuss their relationships in such terms. In addition, the general response to this section may reflect the reluctance of dissatisfied couples to take part in this survey or perhaps that others who are happy are able to ignore any disappointments. The interview responses reveal in more detail how the farang women perceive their marriages.

Interviewees Who Described Their Marriages As Difficult

A quarter of all the women interviewed described their marriages as difficult. A third of the older generation women interviewed described their marriages as difficult and half of these women are now separated due to their husbands' infidelities. Obviously a husband's infidelity would be an enormous disappointment for any woman. The other half are aware of their husbands'

infidelities but are still together having adjusted their expectations in order to remain in the marriage. Presumably, other older-generation women whose husbands committed adultery, or found their relationships difficult for other reasons have since left, or declined to take part in the survey. In contrast, only one of the new-comers describes her marriage as difficult but puts this down to "his family, and he is a workaholic," and has no time for her.

Interviewees Who Described Their Marriages As Happy

While half of all the farang women interviewed described their marriages as happy, age-generational differences can also be seen. Half the older-generation and over two thirds of the new-comers said they were happy with their relationships. The majority of all these women claim that their happiness is due to personal and emotional compatibility with their husbands. However, many of these same women also described problems with their husbands' families and financial difficulties, but instead saw them as as 'challenges' rather than disappointments. As Karen, who has been married and living in Thailand for 23 years says, her marriage is, "Good. We've had our ups and downs." Likewise, Christine, a new-comer who has been here for 14 years (married for 25) recognises the difficulties but says her marriage is, "Happy and always getting better. It's not always been easy, but we've developed a strong relationship and every year it gets better and better."

Perceptions of Difficulties and Strengths

What are the 'challenges' that these women face? What do the respondents perceive their greatest difficulties to be and what has helped to overcome them? While the questionnaire responses were not complete, the sample indicated that regardless of sex or nationality, personal compatibility rated as the most common determiner of marital satisfaction for more than half the respondents, while financial security was also desirable for a quarter of all respondents.

Family and in-laws were cited as common problems by a third of farang and a quarter of Thai women, but insignificant numbers of men. This may reflect that the social pressures of extended family ties fall upon women, and are perhaps felt more by those who are unaccustomed to them. However, while culture and language were cited as a source of satisfaction by a quarter of all groups (a third of farang women) it caused problems for a quarter of the farang men and Thai women, but only a sixth of farang women and not at all for the Thai men. This may be because the farang women who had problems with language and/or culture have since left, and/or that Thai men, having studied abroad before meeting their wives, had already overcome any problems related to culture and language. Age-generational differences of these variables can be seen from the interviews.

Interviewees Perceptions of Difficulties and Strengths

Difficulties - Older-generation

As previously mentioned, a third of the older generation described their marriages as difficult. In the questionnaires these women placed the blame equally upon family and in-laws, financial insecurity, personal incompatibility and cultural linguistic misunderstandings for causing difficulties. However, when interviewed the focus of blame fell on the husbands and personal incompatibility: Wendy referred to her husband's infidelity, while Catherine's husband's, "jealousy, possessiveness, moodiness, [and] sulks," were too much for her. For Margaret, their "complete separation of social lives, (and) his refusal to discuss problems," made her marriage difficult. However, for Liza the difficulty was, "trying to fit in, to tolerate him and his family". That the second greatest difficulty was problems with the in-laws, perhaps suggests why others who experienced problems with both their husbands and in-laws were unable to cope and have since left their marriage and Thailand. That only a third of the older-generation women cited these difficulties suggests that without them, it was easier for those who have 'survived' to remain in their marriage/Thailand.

Difficulties - New-comers

Over half the new-comers blamed the in-laws for any difficulties they faced, "living in close proximity to his family and having their expectations put upon us,"

upset Teresa. While for Diane and Sharon, "being watched by his family" and having, "no privacy!" annoyed them.

In addition, many women from both generations found the question of acceptance and isolation unexpected problems. Betty says that, "not knowing anyone (outside the family) for the first 3 years," made her feel lonely and isolated. Christine also says that "Isolation - not being able to communicate ... At first I was not able to do anything, completely dependent and I hated that. (It was) Very frustrating." And while Bridget said, "knowing I'll never be accepted and that there is no sense of community either between Thai or farang here," was difficult for her, Karen had the additional problem of not being accepted by "her own people".

Strengths - Older-generation

In general, the older-generation women saw themselves as their greatest source of strength, having few friends to help them, and generally saying that their husbands were unsympathetic, they learnt to rely on their own strengths. Liza says that her, "upbringing, self-discipline and parental love made me able to conform and tolerate" the situation. While Pat simply claims her, "flexibility, adaptability, not too high expectations, and willingness to bend." helped her and like Alice, she, "wanted to be part of a second culture and accepted things that were different." Of course there were exceptions like Karen who credits her husband with, "his support and understanding," and Meg who said she and her husband worked, "together to solve problems."

Strengths - New-comers

In total contrast, over half of the newcomers claimed their husbands or their joint efforts and their, "commitment to each other" were their greatest strengths. Alison described her husband as, "tolerant, flexible, loving and patient," and Mandy says that having, "the will to compromise" has made their relationship successful. This suggests that the new-comers have been more able to find 'partnership' in their marriages.

In addition to their own social backgrounds, and partnerships with their husbands the new-comers noted other factors which help them overcome their 'challenges'. June said she learnt, "Patience and letting things slide with the in-laws (usually) knowing they won't change simply because I'm living there now and simply to keep peace!" While for Mary, "a sense of humour and people to share it with!" has helped. However, Christine believes that having been married 11 years before coming here, she and her husband had got most of their personal adjustments out of the way. Had they come straight away she does not think they would have lasted!

Though the new-comers' greatest difficulties were with the in-laws, that their greatest strengths were found in their husbands suggests that the new-comers' husbands are more committed to their new family units than to the extended family ties and obligations which so commonly destroyed marriages in the past. Thus age-generational differences in the women's perceptions and experience of these variables will be analysed to illustrate social change in marriage patterns and expectations.

As the most common and significant expectation of marriage among all the respondents was that of friendship and partnership, a brief comparison, based on the interviewees' perceptions of Thai and farang expectations of friendship and the literature follows.

Expectations of Friendship

Although most of the women expected partnership and emotional companionship with their husbands, only half of the older-generation said they shared a social life with their husbands. In contrast, over two thirds of the newcomers say that their husbands are their closest friends and they do everything together. This age-generational difference appears to reflect a change in male/female role expectations and may also suggest that Thai and farang expectations of friendship are becoming more similar than before.

The older-generation women who do not share a social life with their husbands are disappointed but resigned to the fact, and have struggled to build their own social networks and strengthen their own independence. Though a third of the new-comers do not share a social life with their husbands only 1 is bitter about this. The others regret that work and family commitments keep their husbands busy but see it as a temporary stage in the relationship rather than a deliberate act of negligence. Also as the new-comers who do not share a social life with their husbands have their own social networks available, the situation appears to be easier for them to accept.

In fact it was suggested in the Culture Shocked Marriages paper that a lack of satisfaction in a woman's relationship or environment created a greater self-reliance of the woman on personal, rather than marital satisfaction, including greater reliance on friends who she may judge to facilitate her emotional needs. Imamura also noted that western women married to Japanese and Nigerian men relied on female networks rather than their spouses for support and socializing and stressed that "Friendship and a support network are among the primary needs expressed by the foreign wife." (1990:185)

Bridget, who has been living in Thailand for 15 years (married 11), states the importance of friendship for farang women:

If you cannot belong in the country you live in, you tend to look to your own kind for support. When you're younger you don't mind so much - you're adventurous and outgoing but as you get older it becomes more difficult, you need some sense of stability and security.

However, finding close friends with shared interests proved difficult for both generations. Many women described the difficulties of forming close friendships and like Catherine say that they know a lot of people, Thais and farang, but not many they could really call true friends! After 15 years in Thailand, Bridget says she has both Thai and farang friends but that it is difficult to get close to either as she believes that,

I'm never going to be Thai and there is always this invisible barrier because I'm a foreigner. I don't really think it's a difference of expectations because I know many Thais who are close friends. And its difficult to have close foreign friends who are of like minds with you.

Coinciding with Imamura's research, it appears that due to a combination of personal expectations and practicalities, "intimacy cannot exceed a critical threshold and friends act differently than they do in their home countries." (Imamura 1990:185)

Thai vs Farang Expectations of Friendship

For those who need to seek friendship outside the marriage, as well as those who share their social lives with their husbands, the problem of definition and expectations of the composition and functions of friendships which vary across cultures arises. On definition, Imamura notes that, "Whereas Americans in particular tend to use the term loosely, other societies tend to reserve the term for a small number of intimate relationships." (Imamura 1990:185) The extended family may be the most important network in one society, school friends in another (neither of which would be available for the farang woman in a strange land, but both of which are important for Thais). In addition, they may be social or the major source of information and opportunities, close-knit or loose-knit. In any case, in most societies, the process of building a friendship takes time!

Mulder described the general differences in Thai and European-farang notions of friendship as follows:

The European concept of friendship is always non-hierarchical and confidential, and therefore essentially confrontational. Thai friendship seems to centre on mutual interests and pre-determined social positions and thus normally includes an element of hierarchy; it is not

necessarily confidential in the sense of opening up to each other and tends to avoid confrontation. (Mulder 1992:vii)

Sharon who has been married and living in Thailand for 13 years emphasised the need of a friend to confide in.

Sometimes I feel I'm missing a good friend, like ... that kind of friendship where you can have somebody that you just discuss anything with, like problems that I don't want to bother my husband with ... a person who is not closely involved that you can talk to and trust is important.

Even though Thais are renowned gossips, they do not appear to be inclined to 'bare their souls' or discuss real personal problems which is desirable among farang friends. Indeed, while foreign women place great emphasis on having close friends to confide in, Thai friendships have been described as superficial as Klausner comments,

Personal relationships lack 'emotional intensity' in preference for the surface friendliness, ubiquitous witty banter and laughter, as intense emotional involvement is culturally frowned upon, simply because of the craving and emotional extension involved, as these lead away from the religious goal of detachment. (Klausner nd:13)

Thus Thais are most often described as fun-loving people who want a friend to have fun with. Most farang women agreed that Thais are very friendly and talkative, but close friendships between them appear to be rare.

Thai Friends

Though many women expressed the desire to have Thai friends neither generation have many. The informants often said that it was difficult to make Thai friends but most of these are not in the position to meet Thais other than family, maids or students. Their social contacts with Thais are very limited and they are unlikely to have had the opportunity to meet a Thai that they may share something in common with. Diane who has been married and living in Thailand for 4 years laments that, "I don't have a Thai friend - (I) have met a lot but not friends." She says the ones she does know are either very rich and 'spoilt', or low-class and uneducated. However, like most women she likes the friendliness of Thai people and would like the opportunity to get to know some. Others confirmed that they had Thai friends which they had met at work, or were neighbours with, to whom they could talk. However, it was said that the depth of some of these friendships would never match that of farang style friends. Janet has been living in Thailand for 29 years and says she has both Thai and Farang friends, but feels that her Thai friends at work always seem to have an ulterior motive. Nonetheless, she does have one very special Thai friend, who she feels quite close and comfortable with.

Although many women were inclined to distinguish between Thai and farang friendships, most of those with Thai friends saw no difference. Liza, who has been living in Thailand for 28 years says that she has some good, Thai and farang friends, and thinks that, "you get 'fake' farang as much as you get 'fake' Thai." After the same length of time in Thailand Pat does not distinguish between Thai and farang either. She says there are

universal personality types and characteristics and whether Thai or farang she is attracted to someone by their personality. Indeed Fran and her husband said,

“We now have lots of friends, farang/farang, farang/Thai, Thai/Thai, and a few single Thais and single farang, it doesn't matter much 'what' they are - its who they are and what makes them tick!”

Farang Friends

Is the fact that most farang women said they found it difficult to make Thai friends a reflection that to Thai women, a farang woman will always be regarded as 'farang' first and foremost? Indeed, Neils Mulder states that his, “being farang excludes me from Thai-Thai intercourse.” (Mulder 1992:vii) and many women believe this is so. However, most of the newcomers surround themselves with other farang women married to Thais. That most socialise and identify with other farang may in fact be limiting their ability to integrate with the host group and thus:

To the extent that foreigners associate among themselves, or that local people consider foreign friends to be in a category apart from local, these networks confirm or reinforce marginality.

(Imamura 1990:185)

Thus, by associating with farang but claiming to desire Thai friends, the newcomers may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, that the social outlets and the pool of potential farang friends available to the older-generation women were limited, many of these women are more likely to either have some Thai friends, or no close friends at all.

However, as cultural differences in perceptions of friendship with Thais were expected, differences between farang ideas of friendship came as a surprise and disappointment to many women. Interestingly, Diane commented how she had more 'culture shock' in dealing with other farang, than in dealing with Thais. She put this down to having been prepared to accept differences with Thais, but had assumed that other farangs would be like her. Likewise, Fran and her husband joined a group of mixed Thai-Farang couples when they first came to live in Thailand. However, she says, "We were attracted because they were like us, mixed couples, but we had nothing more in common."

It would therefore appear that the opportunity to meet other people, Thai or farang with whom these women may share common interests and personalities are as influential as the cultural differences between Thai and farang expectations of friendships on the possibility of bridging these gaps.

Chapter Summary

From the preceding outlines we can see that the average farang woman and her Thai husband, were educated and middle-class and the new-comers were also independent and had traveled too. Most women did not know much about Thailand before their arrival but put their faith in love and expected their marriages to survive any difficulties! They were disappointed to find they had problems with their in-laws, and finances but worst of all, for the older-generation, were problems with their spouse. However, the majority of respondents in this thesis have overcome most difficulties and described their marriages

as happy. They seek like-minded friends to confide in and run to in times of need, but the social outlets were limited for the older-generation and cultural differences affected the pattern of friendships with Thai.

What each spouse brought to their marriage and to their lives in Thailand, together with the general differences in life expectations between Thai and farang and the emerging age-generational differences, provide a general framework of the background variables. The following chapters will compare these expectations with the women's experiences and perceptions of reality to see how these variables affect and have been affected by Thai-farang relationships. Have changes in Thai society affected the degree and the way in which these spouses adjust their expectations, and themselves, to fit with reality?