

CONSUMPTION OF “GLOBALIZED FOOD” AMONG ISAN WOMEN IN BANGKOK

Ms. HELLE B M AASHEIM

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Program in Thai Studies

Faculty of Arts

Chulalongkorn University

Academic year 2011

Copyright of Chulalongkorn University

บทคัดย่อและแฟ้มข้อมูลฉบับเต็มของวิทยานิพนธ์ตั้งแต่ปีการศึกษา 2554 ที่ให้บริการในคลังปัญญาจุฬาฯ (CUIR)
เป็นแฟ้มข้อมูลของนิสิตเจ้าของวิทยานิพนธ์ที่ส่งผ่านทางบัณฑิตวิทยาลัย

The abstract and full text of theses from the academic year 2011 in Chulalongkorn University Intellectual Repository (CUIR)
are the thesis authors' files submitted through the Graduate School.

การบริโภค “อาหารโลกาภิวัตน์” ของผู้หญิงอีสานในกรุงเทพฯ

นางสาวเสอเลอ ออไซม

วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาอักษรศาสตรดุษฎีบัณฑิต

สาขาวิชาไทยศึกษา

คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

ปีการศึกษา 2554

ลิขสิทธิ์ของจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

เฮอเลอ ออไทม์ : การบริโภค “อาหารโลกาภิวัตน์” ของผู้หญิงอีสานในกรุงเทพฯ: กรณีศึกษากลุ่มนิกรกลุ่มปรารถนาดี (CONSUMPTION OF “GLOBALIZED FOOD” AMONG ISAN WOMEN IN BANGKOK: A CASE STUDY OF GOODWILL GROUP FOUNDATION) อ. ที่ปริกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก : ผศ. ดร.นิติ ภาวัครพันธ์, 138 หน้า.

วัตถุประสงค์ของการศึกษานี้เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นรูปแบบการบริโภคอาหารจานด่วนแบบตะวันตกของกลุ่มผู้หญิงจากอีสาน ซึ่งเป็นกลุ่มที่ทำงานอยู่ในกรุงเทพฯ การศึกษานี้ได้เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลเฉพาะมาจากผู้ให้ข้อมูลจำนวน 6 คน เป็นกลุ่มตัวอย่างในการศึกษา และกลุ่มข้อมูลทั่วไปจากตัวอย่างผู้ให้ข้อมูล 25 คน

การศึกษานี้ได้ค้นพบว่าการบริโภคอาหารตะวันตกได้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งในชีวิตของผู้หญิงอีสาน ซึ่งปรากฏการณ์นี้เป็นผลมาจากกระบวนการที่ทำให้เกิดความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมปะทะกับความเหมือนกันทางวัฒนธรรม ตั้งแต่ปี พ.ศ. 2526 ประเทศไทยได้มีร้านอาหารจานด่วนสัญชาติตะวันตกจำนวนมากมายังนี้ เช่น ร้านเคเอฟซี ร้านแมคโดนัลด์ ซึ่งทำให้เกิดความวิตกกังวลเกี่ยวกับการถูกล่อหลอมให้กลายเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวัฒนธรรมเหล่านี้ กิจกรรมตะวันตกในลักษณะเช่นนี้ได้แผ่ขยายมายังประเทศไทยและทั่วโลก ซึ่งวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นของประเทศเหล่านี้กำลังถูกกลืนหายไปเพื่อเข้าสู่โลกในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ อย่างที่ร้านเคเอฟซีและร้านแมคโดนัลด์ที่เปิดสาขาทั่วทุกมุมโลก โดยทัศนะเชื่อว่า สิ่งเหล่านี้กำลังครอบงำวัฒนธรรมอาหารอื่น ๆ ที่ตัวแทนอาหารตะวันตกเหล่านี้เข้าไปถึงด้วยการกำจัดความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมให้หมดไป แต่ในอีกด้านหนึ่ง มีผู้ที่เชื่อว่า โลกาภิวัตน์ไม่ได้เกิดขึ้นในลักษณะเช่นนั้น แต่กลับเป็นลักษณะที่วัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นตีความและใช้อิทธิพลต่างชาติเหล่านี้ในวิถีทางของตน ส่งผลให้เกิดกระบวนการตั้งเอาแบรนด์ตะวันตกเข้าและสร้างรูปแบบของวัฒนธรรมใหม่ขึ้นมา

กรุงเทพฯ มีชุมชนอีสาน และสัดส่วนที่ชัดเจนในกลุ่มนี้คือผู้หญิง ส่วนใหญ่ของผู้หญิงกลุ่มนี้ไม่ได้มีการศึกษาถึงในระดับมหาวิทยาลัยและเกือบทั้งหมดทำงานที่ได้รับค่าจ้างต่ำ นอกจากนี้ ส่วนใหญ่ของผู้หญิงเหล่านี้อาศัยในที่พักราคาถูก พวกเขาตกในสภาพบังคับที่ต้องควบคุมค่าใช้จ่ายและพวกเขาเหล่านี้ยังเป็นกำลังหลักในการส่งเงินไปเลี้ยงดูครอบครัวที่อีสาน สาเหตุเหล่านี้ทำให้เงินเป็นความยากลำบากที่จะหาซื้อจ่ายสิ่งของทีนอกเหนือจากความจำเป็นในการดำรงชีพ แต่ในขณะที่การใช้ชีวิตอยู่ในกรุงเทพฯ พวกเขาตกอยู่ในวงล้อมของสินค้าฟุ่มเฟือยต่าง ๆ เหล่านี้ ซึ่งรวมไปถึงอาหารจานด่วนของตะวันตกด้วย ซึ่งพวกเขาไม่ได้เติบโตขึ้นมาพร้อมกับสิ่งเหล่านี้ที่อีสาน แต่เพราะพวกเขาเผชิญกับจำนวนสินค้าที่มากมายและหลากหลายเหล่านี้ พวกเขาจึงต้องสร้างการตีความและการรับรู้ของพวกเขาเองต่อแบรนด์สินค้าเหล่านี้ ถึงแม้ว่าจะไม่ได้มีต้นทุนในการบริโภคได้บ่อยเหมือนชนชั้นกลางและชนชั้นสูงในสังคม ประเด็นเหล่านี้เป็นสิ่งที่ได้จากกรวิจัยหัวข้อนี้

ผู้ให้ข้อมูลที่เป็นกรณีศึกษามาจากจังหวัดต่าง ๆ ในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย ซึ่งรู้จักในชื่อ “อีสาน” ข้าพเจ้าได้มีโอกาสติดตามพวกเขาไปยังบ้านเกิดที่อีสาน ซึ่ง ณ ที่นั่นข้าพเจ้าได้ศึกษาการกินและรูปแบบการบริโภคของพวกเขา ทำให้ข้าพเจ้าได้กลุ่มข้อมูลทั่วไปเกี่ยวกับวิถีชีวิตของพวกเขา ข้าพเจ้ายังได้ศึกษารูปแบบการบริโภคของพวกเขาในกรุงเทพฯ จากนั้นข้าพเจ้าได้มองหาความเชื่อมโยงที่มีต่อการบริโภคอาหารจานด่วนของพวกเขาและได้สร้างข้อสรุปที่แสดงถึงรูปแบบการบริโภคของอาหารประเภทนี้ในกรอบคิดของ “ความแตกต่างและความเหมือน”

สาขาวิชา.....ไทยศึกษา.....ลายมือชื่อนิติ.....

ปีการศึกษา.....2554.....ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปริกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก.....

508 05160 22 : MAJOR THAI STUDIES

KEYWORDS : CONSUMPTION / GLOBALIZATION / FAST FOOD / ISAN WOMEN / BANGKOK

HELLE B M AASHEIM: CONSUMPTION OF GLOBALIZED FOOD AMONG ISAN WOMEN BANGKOK. ADVISOR: ASST. PROF. NITI PAWAKAPAN, Ph.D., 138 pp.

The purpose of this study was to examine the consumption pattern of Western fast food among women from Isan, who were working an living in Bangkok. Qualitative data was collected from six case study informants, as well as a broader set of data was collected from 25 informants.

This study investigates the extent to which Isan women incorporate the consumption of Western food into their own lives, and the extent to which this is done by the process of cultural heterogenization versus cultural homogenization. Thailand has, since 1983, been introduced to a variety of Westen fast food restaurant, such as KFC and McDonald's. The fear of cultural homogenization is that these large, Western corporations are spreading across Thailand and the rest of the world, the local cultures are disappearing, leading to a globalized world. As KFC and McDonald's restaurants are opening across the world, according to this particular view, it is believed that they will dominate every food culture they are exposed to, eliminating any differences between cultures. On the opposite side there are those who believe that globalization does not happen in a vacuum, and that local cultures interpret and use these foreign influences in their own manner, causing a localization of the Western brands into the new cultures.

Bangkok has a large Isan community, and a significant proportion of them are women. The majority of these women do not have a university education and most are therefore employed in jobs that pay the minimum salary. In addition, most of these women live in cheap housing, they are forced control their spending, and they are the sole breadwinner of their family back in Isan. This constant focus on money makes it difficult to purchase products which are not necessary to their survival, yet living in Bangkok they are surrounded by products, including Western fast food, which they were not exposed to while growing up in Isan. As they are now faced with this variety of products, they are bound to have their own interpretations and perceptions about these brands, despite not having the resources to consume them as often as the middle - and the upper class, both of which have received extensive amounts of research.

The case study informants came from various provinces in the northeastern region of Thailand. I followed them to their homes where I studied their eating and consumption patterns, as I acquired a general set of knowledge about their lives. I also studied their consumption pattern in Bangkok. I then looked at the data connected to their consumption of fast food and drew some conclusions regarding their eating habits in light of the heterogenization-homogenization framework.

Field of Study: ...Thai Studies..... Student's Signature

Academic Year: .2011..... Advisor's Signature

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor, Assistant Professor Niti Pawakapan, Ph.D., for his continued support and help throughout this process. I appreciate all his contributions of time and ideas, and for that I will always be grateful.

I would also like to thank all the members of my thesis committee, especially Associate Professor Suchitra Chongstitvatana and Professor Siraporn Nathalang, for all their support and guidance during my time at Chulalongkorn University. I would like to thank the staff at the Thai Studies Center at Chulalongkorn University for all their help.

I need to thank my dear students, who were the inspiration behind selecting this particular topic for my thesis. They have stuck with me over the last three years, and they have invited me into their hearts and homes. They have taught me so much about life, and that is something that I will always appreciate.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family and friends who have supported me throughout this journey. I could not have done it without their love and support.

Contents

	page
Abstract (Thai).....	iv
Abstract (English).....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Contents.....	vii
List of Tables.....	xi
List of Figures.....	xii
List of Charts.....	xiii
Chapter I Introduction to the Thesis	1
1.1 Approach to Study.....	5
1.2 Goal of Study.....	8
1.3 Objectives.....	8
1.4 Literature Review.....	8
1.5 Major Arguments.....	11
1.6 Hypothesis.....	13
1.7 Research Methodology.....	13
1.8 Significance of the Research.....	15
1.9 Definition of Terms.....	17
1.10 Limitations of the Study.....	18
Chapter II Literature Review.....	20
2.1 Consumption.....	21
2.2 Globalization.....	21
2.3 Globalization of Food.....	23
2.4 McDonald's as the Focus of Fast Food Research.....	25
2.5 Western Fast Food Outlets in Bangkok.....	31
2.6 Public Eating.....	31
2.7 Transnationalism.....	37
2.9 Consumption and Public Culture in India and China.....	38
Chapter III The Six Case Studies.....	40
3.1 Case 1 – Lek, Sisaket.....	41
3.1.1 Historical Background.....	41

3.1.2 Lek's Family Relations.....	41
3.1.3 Food Habits/Eating Habits.....	45
3.1.4 Lek's Cooking Job.....	48
3.1.5 The Phi Ta Khon Festival.....	51
3.2 Case 2 – Kung, Roi-Et.....	52
3.2.1 Historical Background.....	52
3.2.2 Kung's Family Relations.....	53
3.2.3 Moving to Bangkok.....	55
3.2.4 Visiting Kung's home town of Kaset Wisai.....	56
3.2.5 Housing and Local Eating Habits.....	59
3.2.6 Western Food in Roi-Et.....	63
3.2.7 Kung's Eating Habits in Bangkok.....	65
3.3 Case 3 – Kai, Buriram.....	66
3.3.1 Historical Background.....	66
3.3.2 Kai's Family Relations.....	66
3.3.3 Traveling to Kra-sang, Briram.....	68
3.3.4 House and the Local Cuisine.....	69
3.3.5 Western Fast Food in Buriram.....	74
3.3.6 Kai's Personal Relationship with western Food.....	75
3.4 Case 4 – Araya, Yasothorn.....	77
3.4.1 Historical Background.....	77
3.4.2 Araya's Family Relations.....	78
3.4.3 Araya's Education and Employment History.....	79
3.4.4 Araya's Daily Food Consumption in Bangkok.....	81
3.4.5 Visiting Yasothorn.....	82
3.4.6 Local Eating Habits and Visiting the Local Market.....	84
3.4.7 Eating Out.....	88
3.5 Case 5 – Tao, Roi-Et.....	89
3.5.1 How Tao Came to be My Student.....	89
3.5.2 Chaturaphak Phiman.....	89
3.5.3 Tao's Family Relations.....	90
3.5.4 Tao's Past Relationship.....	92
3.5.5 Training and Employment.....	93
3.5.6 Tao's Eating Habits.....	94
3.5.7 Tao's new boyfriend and how they bond over food.....	97
3.5.8 Tao's feelings towards Kung.....	101
3.6 Case 6 – Pim.....	102

3.6.1 Historical Background.....	102
3.6.2 Pim’s Family Relations.....	103
3.6.3 Pim’s Employment History.....	104
3.6.4 Visiting Pim in Surin.....	106
3.6.5 Pim’s Sister and Plans for Moving Abroad.....	108
3.6.6 Pim’s Food Preferences and Opinions on Western Food.....	109
3.7 Conclusion.....	111
Chapter IV Data	
Analysis.....	112
4.1 The Advantages of Globalized Food.....	112
4.1.1 Accessibility.....	112
4.1.2 Cleanliness/Coolness.....	113
4.1.3 Bo Time Restraints/ no “hidden” costs.....	113
4.2 KFC versus McDonald’s.....	114
4.3 The KFC Preference.....	115
4.4 Choice of Location to Visit.....	116
4.5 The Pizza Culture.....	116
4.6 McDonald’s.....	117
4.7 Family Gatherings/ Play Area.....	117
4.7.1 McDonald as a Toy Distributor.....	118
4.7 Pay Day or Work Promotion.....	118
4.8 Romantic Occasion.....	119
4.9 A Fast Food Restaurant as a Meeting Place.....	120

List of Tables

	page
Table 2.1	34
Average Monthly expenditure per House hold by Type of Food Consumed, 1990.....	
Table 2.2	34
Average Weekly Expenditures for Prepared Food Eaten Away from Home, Greater Bangkok, 1990.....	
Table 2.3	35
Attitudes Toward Eating Out, All-Thailand	

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Athap Namman Phrai (1983) / Itrueth Namman Phrai (1984).....	page 8
------------	--	-----------

Chapter I

Introduction to the Thesis

Gastronomers of the year 1825, who find satiety in the lap of abundance, and dream of some newly made dishes, you will never see the importations which travelers yet unborn will bring to you from that half of the globe which has still to be discovered or explored. How I pity you! (Brillat – Savarin, 1925)

Food lies at the very heart of human existence. The need for food is our primary biological drive, and without it, we die. The food business represents approximately 10 percent of the Gross Domestic Product and employs millions of workers worldwide. In addition to its material importance, food plays an important cultural and symbolic role around the globe in different ways. Hauck-Lawson (2004) show that food choices, what one eats or, as importantly, chooses not to eat, can communicate aspects of a person's identity or emotion in a way that words alone cannot (Miller & Deutche, 2009). We can learn plenty about personal and group identity through what is eaten, what is not eaten and the production of food.

In religions such as Islam, the absence of pork plays a significant role in the lives of the followers. Most Muslims, despite not being a legal obligation, take the period of Ramadan, when Muslims are not allowed to eat or drink anything from sunrise to sunset, very seriously. In Christianity, images associated with what we eat have become an important tradition. The most powerful images associated with the Christian tradition are the bread and wine of communion, which refer to the body and blood of Jesus, and his sacrifices on the cross. As for Buddhism, some believers refrain from eating onion, garlic and leeks as they are said to increase both sexual desire and anger. It is believed that Buddha himself advised monks to avoid consuming ten kinds of meat: elephant, dog,

horse, lion, tiger, boar, panther, hyena, snake and human meat. If we look beyond religion, cultural symbols such as the golden arches of McDonald's or Colonel Sanders of KFC, are powerful food-related symbols which can be recognized worldwide, by adults and children alike. McDonald's, especially, with the ubiquitous Golden Arches, has become a saturated symbol, so laden with contradictory associations and meanings that the company stands for something greater than the sum of its parts (Watson 2006: 2).



Image 1.1 Colonel Sanders of KFC



Image 1.2 The Golden Arches

Food habits – how we produce, prepare and consume food – represent powerful symbols whose associations are closely held, in their own way, by nearly everyone. Looking at people's relationships with food can speak volumes about the people – their beliefs, their passions, their background knowledge and assumptions, and their personalities – all elements whose explorations can be strengthened by good research (Miller & Deutsch, 2009). At the core of this research lies the relationship between food and the human experience, and learning more about the human experience beyond the matter of food.

There is a significant body of literature on food and its cultural and symbolic importance, some of which will be mentioned in the upcoming section. Food being perceived as a symbolic activity starts with the consumer perception of an object not as a

material thing valued for its functional benefits but as a symbol that carries its weight of values that are mentally assigned by the consumer. Thus, the objects are replaced with symbols, and consumers, in turn, become both the producers and consumers of these symbols. Such transformation of objects is argued to be the crux of postmodern consumption (Kniazeva et. al, 2007). Consumption is at the forefront of the topic of globalized food, and globalized consumption is a topic that has received more and more attention over the past twenty years or so. Consumption is at the core of our society, and what ties individuals to society today is their activities as consumers, their lives are organized around consumption (Baumann 1987: 168 quoted in Beng Huat 3). Consumption is, in its own right, a subject for analysis. The investigation and focus on popular culture has led to an increase in the amount of writings on the topic of consumption. It is a concept which is associated with high speed and high quantity, whether in industry, fashion, or modernity or good taste, which can be seen in the changes in food culture in various countries (Suwanlaong, 2006).

Each item consumed is surrounded by its own systems of production, distribution, marketing, procurement, and finally, consumption. Each of these systems is in turn, constituted by its own multifaceted and segmental economies in an increasingly globalised capitalism (Beng-Huat, 4). Beng Huat discusses, as an example, the manufacturing of clothes. That each garment is not merely located on one site, but may be dispersed across various sites around the world: An American clothing company may buy cotton from Africa, transform it into fabric in Switzerland, design the garment in New York, cut and sew it in one of the increasing number of locations in Asia. The finished garment is then re-exported and distributed to its global market locations, including relative affluent Asian ones. This matter can then be transferred to the discussion of food consumption, and we may start asking ourselves what it indeed local and what is indeed foreign cuisine. And we may add another layer by conducting an analysis of particular items of consumption to investigate the place of these objects in the identity construction of its consumers.

Eating is an activity that can take place in either the private sphere or the public sphere. In Thailand, public eating has increased dramatically in the last twenty or so years

following Thailand's rapid industrial and urban development and subsequent crisis and recovery, many of these patterns have historical roots related to gender relations in the region (Yasmeen, 2006). Yasmeen (2006) noted that according to the FAO, 90% of the population goes out a majority of the time for meals outside the home. In the 1960s, merely 30% of the average food budget among the population was spent on prepared food in Greater Bangkok (NSO 1963, as quoted in Yasmeen, 2006). Given that the extended metropolitan region had a population of almost nine million in the mid 1990s, the prepared food industry is an important part of the economy, whether that being Western fast food or local food. Since McDonald's and KFC first put their mark on Thailand in 1983 and 1982 respectively, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Western fast food restaurants.

Studies done on the population in China has shown that the consumption of fast food is not just a way to satisfy one's basic needs (e.g. Lisa Rofel, 2007). Rather, it is seen as a means to fulfill one's desire, and with the increase in Western establishments, the desire to consume grows. As Huang Haibo explains,

For some time, eating is no longer the question, the question has changed to eating with whom, where and what (Haibo, 2002).

It has long been believed that consumption is not only used in a way to fulfill one's desires, but that consumers consume to create an identity (Belk, 1988). Consumption gives meanings by the consumers' perceptions of significant experience and feelings through social interaction (Holt, 1995). Cooley (1964) coined the "looking-glass self" which indicates that the development of self-identity is based on the messages an individual perceives that he receives from others. This theory will be discussed later on in this chapter.

In addition to self-identity, social class identity and the concept of class continues to daunt anthropologists due to its lack of universal, conclusive measures of membership. Ethnographic research on social class supplements early discourses implying that classes

neatly bound, homogenous units, yet “in today’s multicultural society, classes tend to be more internally varied than they are unified in opposition to other classes” (Kottak and Kozaitis, 2003: 213). In this thesis, we distinguish between classes in terms of educational- and income levels, whereby the case study informants are without a university education and makes approximately the minimum wage.

1.1 Approach to Study

When we talk about defining the relationship between globalization and culture, there are two paths it can take. The first path, which is adopted by Marxist and other radical critics, focuses on alleged cultural homogenization, fostered generally by what is taken as the general spread of capitalist consumerism, and specifically by its avatars, large Western, especially American, media corporations* (Seabrook, 2004). Critics of capitalist consumerism might take upon themselves to promote local cultures to try and prevent the so-called *Americanization** that they perceive to be a huge threat. They believe that the homogenization will destroy the nation state, and fighting this process is an act of self-preservation. If we view the spread of Western fast food restaurants across the globe in terms of cultural homogenization, one would assume that Western fast food restaurants, such as KFC and McDonald’s, will come to dominate every food culture worldwide without any local food culture remaining.

The fear of globalization goes beyond just the spread of Western fast food chains, and includes the fear of other local institutions becoming globalized. Wilkinson (2006) depicts an image of how this cultural homogenization might be spread across the globe from the perception of an anti-globalist:

* companies in various mass media such as television, radio, publishing, movies and the Internet.

* refers to the influence the United States has on other parts of the world in terms of culture, cuisine, technology etc.

A composite nightmare of the anti-globalists might depict a world of six billion social clones all living in suburban houses, speaking Valley-English, drinking coffee at Starbucks, eating burgers at McDonald's, shopping at Walmart ... in short, a universal Los Angeles filled with interchangeable Californians burning Iraqi oil in the gas tanks of Japanese cars as they drive to Ethiopian restaurants where they will drink Australian wine named after French grape-growing regions as they prepare to jet to Tokyo, perhaps to protest about globalization.

The second path it can take, focuses on anthropologists and qualitative sociologists who emphasize the heterogenizing dimensions of globalization. Globalization does not work in a vacuum, and taking into consideration the actions of the consumer and not viewing the consumer as just a passive recipient of information, is an approach which is the ideal backdrop for this particular study. While Marxist and radical critics focus on the effects on economically driven globalization forces on culture, these other kinds of analysts see culture as relatively autonomous of, and certainly never wholly or directly constrained by, economic forces. Thus, while the former group concentrates on the capitalist economy's 'globalization of culture', the latter group focuses first and foremost on what could be referred to as *cultural globalization** (Inglis & Gimlin, 2009). They believe that one should not immediately assume that the presence of Starbucks or McDonald's in a certain place, will inevitably lead to fundamental changes in thought and practices. Tomlinson (1997) puts it into perspective,

In everyday activities like working, eating or shopping, people are likely to be concerned with their immediate needs – their state of health, their family and personal relations, their finances and so on. In these circumstances the cultural significance of working for a multinational, eating lunch at McDonald's, shopping for Levis, is unlikely to be interpreted as a threat to national

* refers to the transmission of ideas, meanings and values across national borders.

identity, but how these mesh with the meaningful realm of the private: McDonald's as convenient for the children's birthday party; jeans as a dress code for leisure-time activities and so on.

Brands are consumed differently in different places, as there is always domestication of meaning (Jackson, 2004). As the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz said, the contemporary world is characterized by an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and imported (1996:5 as quoted in Jackson, 2004) No society can claim to provide the authentic source of meaning for any particular commodity or cultural form. Rather, as Miller argues, there is a growing equality for genuine relativism:

Central Africans in suits, Indonesian soap operas, and South Asian brands are no longer inauthentic copies by people who have lost their culture after being swamped by things that only North Americans and Europeans 'should' possess. Rather, there is the equality of genuine relativism that makes none of us a model of real consumption and all of us creative variants of social processes based around the possession and use of commodities (Miller, 1995: 144).

I will weigh the case studies up against the theory of heterogenization and evaluate the ability of the consumer to use the foreign fast food influences in their own ways. I predict that, as already stated in my hypotheses, my informants will behave according to the localization theory, interpreting the experience in their own manner as active consumers. In addition, I predict that the case study informants identity will be shaped by the looking-glass theory, where their identity is partly determined by how they perceive that external observers see them.

1.2 Goal of Study

It is obvious that globalization has a continued impact on the Thai consumer, and it is equally obvious that every consumer, no matter from what social status, is influenced by its effects and interprets them in their own manner with the means that they possess. The average consumer is faced with an endless amount of products to choose from on a daily basis, and globalized products play a significant part of the food market. While areas outside of the capital city of Bangkok are still, to some extent, self-sufficient, as Sunate Suwanlaong mentions in her thesis on the historical development of consumerism in Thai society (2006), Bangkok has, over the last 200 years, become the most capitalist and consumer oriented city in Thailand. The necessities of life, being housing, clothing food and medicine, are nowadays reached through capital assets, labour and machines. The poor as well as the middle class and the rich are all affected and have their own ways to interpret and relate to this consumer-focused society, and the goal of the study is therefore to investigate the extent to which disadvantaged Isan women who are living and working in Bangkok, interpret these influences on their own lives and on Thai society.

1.3 Objectives

1. To study the consumption of globalized food among Isan women in Bangkok.
2. To examine the relationship between Isan women's identity and their perception of Western fast food.
3. To investigate to what extent the hybridization of food consumption occurs among Isan women.

1.4 Literature Review

There is a large and expanding body of literature within the field of food studies.

The first comprehensive analysis in relation to the lives of people and its place among other products was offered in the consumer behavior discipline by Levi (1981, 1999). Levi started by assuming that human events are highly symbolic, and his interpretation of food became a process of searching for meanings based on the analysis of stories, called ‘myths,’ elicited from interviews with housewives. Reflecting on the nature of symbols, Levi asserted that the social group prescribes roles and their accompanying symbols, and consumers and consumers adopt the roles suited to their identities. This theory led the author to conclude that the basic vocabulary of cooking and eating is used to express identities. Since then, this classification has been used extensively by researchers, and extensive bodies of consumer research has focused on this aspect of consumption and documented that consumption objects and consumption practices are filled with symbolic meaning that may play a part in the construction of the consumer’s identity (eg. Solomon, 1983; Richins, 1994).

In addition to the focus that is placed on the symbolic meaning of consumption, there is also extensive scholarly literature on cultural homogenization-heterogenization in various domains. Hollis (2009), for example, dealt with the importance of culture in competition between global and local brands of various products. Comparing opinions of consumers from eight countries, he concluded that global brands were more successful in most of the surveyed attributes (Pekajova et al., 2010). And if we look at it from the direct influence of the consumer on products in a more complex manner, Wood et al. (1997) found that Cadbury’s chocolates* had to completely adapt to the Chinese way of doing business when trying to infiltrate the market. More examples of Chinese influences are found later in chapter two. In the instance of Cadbury’s, the company had to reduce the sugar content of their chocolates and increase the amount of cocoa solids, as well as change the product names to local names. Matters had to be adapted to suit the local culture at every level of production and distribution, demonstration the resilience of Chinese local consumption culture.

* A confectionary company owned by Kraft Foods. Its headquarters are in London England, and operates in over 50 countries worldwide.

There is a diverse range of approaches found in these food studies, what they have in common is that food is at the forefront of the research. The study of eating habits interfaces with other social spheres such as agricultural systems, religious beliefs, kinship patterns, and medical practices and is a solid province of anthropology and history (Yasmeen, 2006). Regarding Western fast food and its expansion to Asia, Watson with his book *Golden Arches East* (1997) gives elaborate details about how McDonald's is perceived by Asian consumers from a local perspective. There is a detailed section on McDonald's in chapter two of this thesis. Most of the research done on Western fast food focuses solely on McDonald's. However, in one case study by Wall (2000), she talks about the resistance KFC faced when first arrived in India in 1995. Soon after its arrival, opposition groups told the restaurant chain to leave, but KFC remained in the country and set in motion a public relations campaign, calling press conferences to defend its presence in India. In November of 1995, KFC opened its second restaurant in India, which soon was closed down by the government due to supposed 'health code violations.'

The arrival of KFC in India and the resistance it met, was belittled by the American media. They could not understand why India would be against "harmless Colonel Sanders," and they assumed that the cause of the overreaction was Indian backwardness. KFC did not meet such resistance when it opened in Thailand, and might be explained by the facts that Thai consumers have always been incorporating foreign dishes into their cuisine. This will be elaborated upon in chapter two.

The issue of homogenization is important to this thesis. It would be a mistake to think that fears about culinary homogenization are historically new. France has been at the forefront of trying to avoid globalization, as is mentioned in Gimling et al. 2009. Gimlin et al. talks about what occurs when actors perceive what they take out to be their national cuisine as being under threat from outside 'homogenizing' processes. The resistance to perceived homogenization can crate self-conscious modes of heterogenization. Here we often talk about the terms, *neophilia** versus *neophobia*.*The

* love of or enthusiasm for what is new or novel.

* the fear of new things or experiences.

thought of the novel in food can be utterly threatening for some, while appealing for others, with complicated mixtures of delight and disgust attending foodways as they are constantly unsettled and resettled through ongoing modes of appropriation and adaptation (Inglis et al, 2009: 27).

What Inglis notes as the most striking paradoxes of contemporary food globalization, is a movement dedicated to the preservation to what it takes to be the 'national' and 'local' in food becomes itself transnational in scope, influence and means of organization. Because of the attractive meaning assigned to foreign food items in the global context, consumer tastes change when traditional foods give way to new food categories. Even within a cultural system, sub-cultural influences play this mediating role, the case in point being Mexican food in the American context (Kniazeva et. al. 2007). Ger and Belk (1996) conceptualize the process of symbol transformation as the reconfiguration of meanings by consumers, and the reconstruction of these reconfigured meanings into the context of one's own culture. As a result of such transformations, claims the authors, global culture becomes a jointly shaped culture, because it is not only made by the foreign producers who bring new goods onto the market, but also by local consumers who participate in shaping the images of these goods. For the consumers, this global postmodern culture is marked by creolization, incorporating old and well known products made at home with those made in other countries.

1.5 Major arguments

My proposed research involves the study of globalized food consumption among Isan women in Bangkok, the significance this food plays in their lives and well as how their integrate this food into their eating pattern. In Thailand's globalizing society, women are faced with a multitude of products to choose from, and food options are endless. Not only can women choose between local foods, but international foods are widely available, and play a significant part of the food market. Western food chains are present across the country, especially in the capital. Isan women are surrounded by

Western food chains despite having fewer resources to enjoy these alternatives than perhaps other groups. They surely must have their own interpretations of these influences on their own lives and on Thai society.

Food is not only an important topic worthy of study, but can itself be used as a means to gain insight to other issues, such as issues that would be difficult to explore had it not been for the food-focused approach. At the core of the research lies the issue of consumption, and there are two contrasting views on consumption as identity formations. The Marxist tradition sees mass consumption as the instrument of capital which transformed working individuals into consumers in order to further its own interest – capital accumulation (Beng-Huat, 2000). In this sense, consumers are viewed as easily manipulated, and tricked into purchasing products by advertisements and otherwise. On the other side there are the post-modernist writers who views the consumer as one who uses mass-produced products in their own manner, and the products are given a meaning through their active incorporation in people's lives (Jackson, 1993).

While discussing the heterogenization versus homogenization framework, it is important to take into consideration the identity of the consumer as an active participant. The looking-glass self theory, which was mentioned previously, argues that the development of self-identity is based on how the individual perceives messages they receive from the outside. Accordingly, there are three components of the looking-glass self: i) an individual's perception of how he appears to others, ii) his perception of how others judge that appearance, and iii) his feelings about this perceived judgment from others (Brown, 1998). According to this theory, it is no important how others make the judgement, merely how the individual perceives how other people view him. Self-identity is therefore rooted in the eyes of others.

I argue therefore that the case study informants create and reaffirm their identity based on how they believe they are being perceived from external sources, and participate in activities that might increase what they believe to be a positive external perception through the practice of conspicuous consumption

1.6 Hypothesis

1. The women interpret the consumption experience in their own manner and localize the experience into their own culture. Globalized food consumption is transformed by the women to suit their own needs and desires.

2. The women consume the Western food in order to emulate the higher classes. They use food consumption in an attempt to distance themselves from their own lower class, and they achieve a sense of self-worth as they are able to say that they are enjoying 'expensive taste.'

1.7 Research methodology

My proposed research involves the study of globalized food consumption among Isan women in Bangkok, the significance this food plays in their lives and well as how they integrate this food into their regular eating patterns. By taking an ethnographic approach and relying first and foremost on case studies, the majority of the data collection is based on case studies. The data collected is related to their everyday lives, as well as contains some background details about various aspects of their lives. The informants are:

1. Between the ages of 21 and 48
2. Thai nationals
3. From the northeastern region of Thailand
4. Have not attended university

The research was conducted by doing a set of six case studies. I have been teaching English to a group of adult students on a voluntary basis for four years, and the

case studies were randomly drawn from this particular group. I was able to travel to Isan* to visit four of the six informants to conduct observational research. I lived with their families, cooked food in their kitchens and partook in most of their daily activities. By doing the interviews during these activities, a conversational rhythm was established where the thoughts of the participants and their views on different matters were volunteered as opposed to forced out of them. The fact that I also have known each case study participant for years and that they have complete trust in me, gave me the opportunity to collect information beyond what an outsider might have been able to gather.

I spent extra time with the informant I did not visit, making sure I got a detailed picture of her home life in Isan. I gathered detailed, thick description and analysis of the experience, which is at the forefront of the qualitative research approach. Viewing human behaviour as fluid, dynamic and highly situational over time and place, in a qualitative approach, individuals and groups are said to create individualistic realities based on the social constructions of the individual or group and the lenses through which they view the world at large (Berger, 1966).

I also interviewed a larger group, focusing on more general questions relating to their eating habits, gathering a certain amount of numerical data to examine and represent the experience. Here I focused less on their perception of different matters and more on the 'truth' of the situation. This larger group extended beyond my group of students, but have similar demographics to the case studies. The interviews were also open-ended, and freedom of expression was encouraged to make the discourse and analysis more varied. The study use the framework of homogenizations versus heterogenization to get an understanding as to the extent the case study informants are just 'passive consumers in a globalized world.'

As I, first and foremost, decided to conduct the research using case studies, I initially had to investigate what this kind of research could contribute to the field. Qualitative research uses a wide-angle focus, and the answers it seeks tends to be broader and more general than that of qualitative research method. It studies behaviour in a more

natural and holistic manner, as opposed to the more clinical settings of quantitative data research. The researcher tries to a much greater extent to interact with the research participants, getting an understanding of behaviours and phenomena through the eyes of the participant. To get an understanding of the women's perception of fast food, a qualitative research method gives us the better picture, but the method has its critics.

Critics of ethnographic methodology believe qualitative data gathering techniques is not able to represent the population as a whole, but but I also incorporate a quantitative research approach among a wider group of respondents to contrast and compare the shorter statements with the six case studies.

1.8 Significance of the Research

1. This study can provide us with a better understanding of eating patterns among Isan women in Bangkok and will help to formulate the factors, which are important in this process.
2. This study investigates how women incorporate the consumption of Western food into their lives, and we get an understanding of the process and the extent to which this happens in a hybridized way.

The ways in which Isan women interpret the Western food and use it in their own lives, will hopefully provide us with an in-depth understanding of the manner in which this takes place. Isan women make up a large portion of the Bangkok population, and despite having significantly less resources to enjoy the Western fast food than the middle and upper class, they are just as much entitled to purchasing these products as anyone else. The perceptions these women hold about the Western fast food, might give us a better insight into how these women incorporate the food into their everyday lives and the meaning this has to them.

Most of the research that has previously been conducted on the consumption of Western fast food, has been conducted among middle class consumers and the so-called

‘new rich’ of Asia. This is a group which has emerged as a result of the rapid economic growth in East and Southeast Asia over the last few decades. Richard Robinson and David S. Goodman (1996) explain that their common basis of their social power and position is increasingly capital, credentials, and experience rather than rent or position in state apparatus or feudal hierarchy. The new rich in Asia can be characterized as the new middle-class, and Beng Huat (2000) explains that, with the new and expanding desires of the new rich, a new lifestyle of consumerism has emerged in Asia (2000: 3). It is therefore understandable that this particular group gets the majority of attention.

My work departs from previous food research by focusing on a group that is often overlooked when it comes to globalization, localization and eating pattern, yet is important as it makes up a large group of the Bangkok population. Merely focusing research on the middle class or the ‘new rich’ of the population, while neglecting those with perhaps less funds, will not give us an accurate portrayal of reality. Both groups are a part of the consumerist culture to varying degrees, and while the middle class might be influenced by the ‘excessive consumerism,’ the lower classes have their own interpretation of the consumer society in which they live. In this research, we will also be able to see the extent to which the informants incorporate the fast food into their own lives, and the extent to which this is done.

In addition, very little research regarding the relationship between consumers and Western fast food has been conducted in Thailand. Research has been conducted on food and on the matters of street food, but very little seems to have been done on Western fast food in Thailand, per se. Extensive research has been done in Singapore as well as China (Huat, 2000 and Watson, 1007), and although some of the results might be similar to that we can find in Thailand, there are surely to be differences found between the countries.

Focusing on women, we develop a crucial understanding of how everyday life is organized and experienced by this particular gender, from a particular socio-demographic group. As a gendered activity, the daily course of buying, preparing, selling, and consuming food in many ways defines, distinguishes, and modulates the life-worlds of women, men and children. The performance or non-performance of food-related work is

also instrumental in defining culturally meaningful ideologies of femininity and masculinity (Yasmeen, 2006).

1.9 Definition of Terms

Globalization: With this term we refer to the process in which the experience of everyday life, marked by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, is becoming standardized around the world. This term has both negative and positive connotations, and is often changed to ‘glycolization’ which refers to a process where both globalization and the local culture affect each other to varying degrees.

Globalized food: Food which is part of global food systems. It does not necessarily just mean American fast food. It refers to food and modes of consumption, being dispersed into places far removed geographically from their place of origin.

Consumption: Consumption refers to the act or process of consuming goods or services.

Homogenization: A cultural phenomena in which capitalist consumerism is at the forefront. It is a term adopted by Marxist and other radical critics, which points out that as Western-led brands are becoming more and more dominant across the globe, the cultural specificities are ‘battered out of existence’ (Tunstall, 1977: 57). It focuses on the effect of economically driven forces upon culture, perceiving the receiving end as utterly passive.

Heterogenization: The contrasting dimension of homogenization. According to this process, globalization processes may actually help reinvigorate, if not in fact create local sense of belonging and identity. This term is also often referred to as cultural globalization or localization.

Hybridization: Cultural hybridization occurs when elements of a traditional culture mix with a more globalized mindset.

Isan: the northeastern region of Thailand, which is the poorest region in Thailand. The term 'Isan' is adopted from the Sanskrit term 'Islam,' meaning in a north east direction. The population is divided into Lao-speaking or Khmer-speaking, depending on proximity to the Khmer border.

Social Identity: is the part of an individual's understanding of himself or herself, which is derived from the perceived membership in a social group.

Self-Identity: is one's concept of oneself, including the perceptions one has about one's abilities, status and worth.

Postmodernism: refers to the cultural conditions that define the present time in human history. According to the scholars conceptualizing the emergence of this new philosophical and cultural movement, postmodern consumption is not just a rational but a largely symbolic act.

1.10 Limitations of the Study

This study has been limited to disadvantaged Thai women. There are only six case studies, which might not give an as accurate portrayal as if there would have been a larger number of studies conducted. In addition, this study only focuses on the female gender and a particular socio-economic group, not providing us with a complete image of the 'fast food consumption' experience in of Thai consumers. Also, when analyzing case studies, there might be conflicting opinions as to what is important and what is not, as well as where the focus should lie, and the subjective factor is evident. Finally, as I am

not a native Thai speaker, there might have been some misunderstandings between the informants and myself. I did not use a translator, and I only communicated with the informants in Thai, and so for this reason there might be some minor issues related to the translations.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In October 1996, McDonald's opened its first restaurant in New Delhi. The event drew protests from Hindu leaders, who criticized the company for serving beef in other parts of the world (though, not of course, in India). A young woman was interviewed while she was waiting for a vegetable burger: It does not matter to me that McDonald's serves beef in its restaurants overseas. I am here for the experience. (John Zubrzycki, Christian Science Monitor)

In the previous introductory chapter to this thesis, we touched upon the topic of consumption and further, consumption as identity formation. As the topic of this thesis is directly related to consumption, this topic will be elaborated on in beginning of this chapter. Then the topic of globalization and globalized food will be discussed. Eating outside of the home is a common phenomenon in Thailand and an increasing number of public eating places that can be found in Thailand are Western restaurants. This can also be seen in other Asian nations, which is perhaps what initially spurred the increasing number of papers and books written about McDonald's in Asia. We will, therefore, discuss some of the research that has been conducted on McDonald's in Asia, and what the findings were. Transnationalism will then be discussed before getting a deeper understanding of how other Asian nations has dealt with the Western food influences.

2.1 Consumption

Consumption implies the purchase and use of goods and services. Sunate Suwanlaong (2006) wrote her doctorate thesis on the topic of consumption, or more accurately ‘Historical Development of Consumerism in Thai Society.’ She focused on the problems that may arise among individual in Thai society as a result of the increase in the acquisition of goods. She claims that in present day society, Thai people are to a large extent ‘badly caught up in the stream of consumerism,’ and that even monks, who are generally regarded as being self-sufficient, will sell holy relics and collect money for religious services and practices for their own gain, going on to spend the money on superfluous items (Suwanlaong, 2006: 2). If this is a recent phenomena or not, should probably be investigated further. But that there has been an increase in a general consumption among all members of society stands true. Suwanlaong (2006) claimed that the cultural values surrounding food are constantly changing. She brings up the example of chickens, which in the past took an extended period of time to rear and had more fibrous meat. Now, with the growth of the agricultural industry, chickens are no longer reared over longer periods of time, leaving the meat to be soft. This particular type of chicken was created to appeal to Thai teenagers (Suwanlaong, 2006: 147.)

2.2 Globalization

The matter of globalization has received much attention over the last few decades. What first must be clarified is what we mean by the concept ‘Globalization.’ According to one particular dictionary (Collins), globalization is the process enabling financial and investment markets to operate internationally, largely as a result of deregulation and connections.’ It is often a good idea to think of globalization in terms of a globalizing world as opposed to a world that already has become fully globalized. Dickens explained the term in this manner:

A world in which nation states are no longer significant actors or meaningful economic units; in which consumer tastes are cultures are homogenized and satisfied through the provision of standardized global products created by global corporations no allegiance to place or community (Dickens 2000: 315).

Globalization is an emotionally filled term, and it is often defined by different people based on their preconceptions about it. For instance, a school of thought following the media imperialism approach, refers to globalization as being a process, which leads to homogeneity and uniformity on a global scale. Others are continually seeking for a better theoretical explanation of the process that has sometimes been referred to as 'glycolization' (Robertson, 1992). Stiglitz (2007) is one of the most trenchant commentators with regards to the topic of globalization. Arguing that outcomes of globalization have differed dramatically for different countries, he notes that societies that have managed their own globalization have generally benefited from it (Stiglitz 2007 as quoted in Carroll.) Jackson (2004) supports this view by 'joining forces with those who have sought to demonstrate against some of the exaggerated claims that have been made in the name of globalization.' And he says that there now is extensive ethnographic research with which to challenge many of the exaggerated claims made about globalization (Jackson, 2004.)

What most people can agree on, however, no matter one's perception about the outcome of the phenomenon, describes globalization by the interconnectivity and interdependence of the world in political, social, cultural, economic and environmental terms (Beck, 2000). The term globalization and transnationalism often overlap, and this will be covered later stage in this chapter. A focus on globalization is not a casual explanation but rather a concern for understanding 'changes in the relationships between geographical scales' (Dickens, 2004: 9). And food, especially, in both the production phase and consumption, illustrates the thoroughly interconnected character of the contemporary era (Le Heron and Hayward, 2003.)

2.3 Globalization of Food

The global food trade is not a new phenomenon. Mintz (2008) says that transportation of food across boundaries have occurred over hundreds of years, and is not a phenomenon people have just recently become accustomed to. The Thai food system, much in unison with the Thai culture, is described in terms Indian and Chinese influences. Curries and noodles are described with minimal attention paid to the indigenous and unique Thai taste (Van Esterik, 1992). As Van Esterik elaborates on, Thais have always been very including of all things foreign, and evidence of Indigenous cuisine can be spotted as far back as 1298, when Marco Polo was in Yunnan near Nanchao. And after the Thai occupation of Angkor Wat (1431), Khmer cooks came to work in Ayutthaya. We assume that these cooks introduced Indian curries and desserts to the Ayutthaya court, and today, Indian desserts such as boiled red and white sweets are found today as part of the royal style system of food for rituals such as weddings (Van Esterik, 1980). Van Esterik explained that adopting the dishes of foreigners was considered a polite and civilized thing to do in the Thai courts. Therefore, many of the 19th century visitors to Thailand failed to appreciate Thai life because they measure civilization so differently from the Thai. As Terwail elaborates,

Civilization was measured, not in broad, clean streets or in impressive stone building, but in knowledge of etiquette, in a dignified posture, in polished speech, and in a variety of subtle signs embedded in Thai culture. Comforts of life, in Siamese terms, were to be found in a pillow against which to lean, in being able to enjoy the rich cuisine, in the mild stimulus of chewing betel, in the appreciation of a dancer's movement or the sound of an orchestra (1989: 4 as quoted in Van Esterik, 1992: 179).

As Suwanlaong (2006) writes, Thai people used to eat with their hands. Three fingers, the thumb, index and middle fingers were used. Spoons and forks were initially

used by priests and members of the royal family, before the rest of the population were able to learn how to use cutlery. Local Isan people still eat with their hands, which will be elaborated on further in chapter 3. Prince Damrong Rachanuphap elaborates:

... I noticed, regarding eating on fooded dishes arranged on Toog, that a spoon and a two slit fork were always placed on the dish . If the Toog was for a priest, a pear spoon was placed for curry or other liquids. Forks were used to cut the food into pieces. The fork on the left hand was used to stabilize the food and one used the right hand fork to tear the food up. The fork was used in order for the left hand to stay clean. Foreigners only started using forks and knives a short time ago. I recall watching a movie about king Henry VIII, in which they still ate with their hands in England in 1800 B.E. In Thailand, we started using forks and knives after His Majesty the King Rama VI came back from Singapore. In 1870, His Majesty ordered a dinner at Paisantuksin Hall. Some of the Royal family used forks in their left hands to stabilize the food and knives in their right hands to cut food into small pieces, which had been referred to in an insulting way, from the use of the two-slit fork... (Nuwatwong, 1949).

As can be understood, even prior to the implementation of McDonald's and KFC in Thailand, the country was already being influenced by foreign forces and accepted the process by localizing the habits into their own, known culture. At the same time as the foreign influences have increased in Thailand, the outside world has equally become acquainted with Thai food, in the form of popular dishes such as tom yam kung and various delectable curries. Thai restaurant can be found across the globe and most Westerners are familiar with the cuisine, despite it perhaps being the cuisine which has been adapted to fit into a particular culture.

The movement of food and foodways across geographical scales represents one of the more common aspects of globalization research. Such research includes studies of the global production and distribution of food (Fine, 2004); the creation of symbolic meaning

around food (Probyn, 1998); and the consumption of food in different locales (Kearns and Barnett, 2000; Cook and Crang, 1996.) The latter is of particular interest to this research, but it has also been the area where discourse about globalization has most symbolically, if not substantially, circulated.

Indeed, much debate has surrounded the role of large American corporations such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Starbucks. This discussion usually relates to the influence of these American corporations and their globalizing processes on local cultures around the world. Ritzer (1996) believed that the introduction of these enterprises into foreign cultures would cause a flattening of local differences around the world. This view is in stark contrast to those who believe that the processes of localization of 'global' food brands is not as smooth (Jackson, 2004), and that there is always an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and the imported (Hannerz, 1996: 5). Much research and ethnographic work has been conducted on the topic of so-called global fast food since the 1990s, as American and Western chains started to open in the former communist world (eg, Caldwell 2004). Some of this research has been elaborated upon below.

2.4 McDonald's as the Focus of Fast Food Research

As the title suggests, evidence shows that the majority of research conducted on the topic of Western fast food has focused on McDonald's, and several books have been written about McDonald's and the McDonaldization of society* throughout the years. If we ask ourselves, why such an extensive amount of research has been conducted on McDonald's, we only need to look to the Golden Arches and to the contradictory meanings and associations that the company represents to get our answer. The fast food chain has been under immense scrutiny, in particular by anti-globalites. They claim that

* Coined by Ritzer and defined as 'the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of society, on a local and on an international level'

cultural imperialism* is being manifested through the spread of McDonald's, and that local cuisine is under threat by the appearance of this fast food chain. McDonald's sells more than just food, and the majority of the population across the globe has their own personal relationship to McDonald's, or at least a very strong opinion about its place in society.

Beng Huat's paper with the title of Singaporeans Ingesting McDonald's (2000) was written as a chapter in his book *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*, in which various reputable researchers contributed with their own chapters relating to topics regarding consumption in different Asian countries. In his chapter, Beng-Huat focuses, first and foremost on the youth in Singapore, and how they relate to and incorporate the experience of McDonald's in their everyday lives. He draws the conclusion that 'whereas all imported products may be potentially imprinted with the cultures of their respective origins, the consumption of the products is not automatically tantamount to the consumption of the cultures of the origins themselves (Beng Huat 2000: 198). As an example, he mentions how Singaporean teenagers use McDonald's to suit their own needs, and the notion of 'American-ness' did not figure into the results given by the teenagers, at all. The teenagers stated that they did not even like the food, but that they went there to meet friends and because of the close proximity to their homes.

In contrast to how customers at McDonald's are encouraged to queue, costumers at a new McDonald's in France reportedly,

...gathered all along the counter, with little respect for the cash registers as line markers.. Consequently, the workers at the counter, for whom it was presumably their first active day on the job, spent a good deal of effort trying to herd customers over to their particular cash register 'station.'

(Fantasia 1995: 222 quoted in Beng Huat 2000)

* Defined as "the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture" (Tomlinson, 1997.) or "the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system."

Beng Huat then goes on to elaborate on different behaviours which takes place depending on the location of the McDonald's. While the Singaporean teenagers are used to queuing, they prefer using the space at McDonald's as a meeting place, and as a place to do their homework. This is in sharp contrast with the policy in the US itself, of minimizing the chances of its outlets from becoming teenage hangouts (Leidner 1993:50 as quoted in Beng Huat 2000). Turning the experience of the place from being something 'exotic' which incorporates the 'American-ness' to being someplace familiar, occurs when the students use the locations as a study place, as opposed to exactly what the Americans want it to be, a place to consume 'fast food,' with no lingering. Beng Huat draws the conclusion that there is no simplistic of product consumption with the imaginary consumption of a culturally desired other (Beng Huat, 2000: 198). Particularly in Singapore, he claims that the 'American-ness' has lost its visibility, and that McDonald's has become a local enterprise and is being interpreted as such.

Gerke (2000) contributed to the book by writing a paper on the Indonesian middle class called 'Global Lifestyles under Local Conditions: the New Indonesian Middle Class.' Here Gerke touches on a subject which is equally relevant to Thai society, namely 'symbolic consumption and lifestyling.' According to Bourdieu (1979: 191), the role of cultural differentiation in the deliniation of social positions is a process by which a particular class-determined habitus distinguishes itself in the cultural market place by identifying with a clearly defined set of products and activities. This particular set of products and activities is referred to as 'a lifestyle.' And as Mulder (1983) put it,

One way or another, consumerism affects the life of all, enticing people to surround themselves with all kinds of good that become indispensable as markers of urbans ways.

Even before the crisis of 1997, only a minor portion of the Indonesian middle class had the funds to participate in the Western or urbanized lifestyle. The majority of the middle class population were not able to afford these items, thus they engaged in substitutional activities to give their lives a ‘middle class touch.’ As their consumption abilities were limited, consumption assumed a merely symbolic dimension (Gerke 2000: 146). He then lists examples of people sitting in locations where they can be easily seen, such as at a McDonald’s outlet, with a hamburger and milkshake in hand. People would share brand name sweaters with their friends, and borrow jewelry from their roommates. Through such acts of symbolic consumption* groups of society try to demonstrate membership to other groups and might end up ignoring their own reality.

Prior to this particular book by Beng Huat (2000) being published, Watson (1998) argued in his book *Golden Arches East*, that McDonald’s has largely separated from its American roots and has become a local institution for generations of consumers in various Asian countries, which is very much in line with the matter in which Beng Huat (2000) was arguing. His book is also made up of a collection of case studies, all written by different writers, and which all have different views on the topic of globalization. With the book, their goal was to produce ethnographic accounts of McDonald’s social, political and economic impact on five, resilient local cultures. The book was written in 1998, and a great deal has happened since this. By 2000, McDonald’s had spread to 119 countries with over 27,0000 restaurants worldwide. Watson states that McDonald’s has become a local institution in these respective countries largely because of the manner in which it has been absorbed and assimilated, so that it is no longer thought of as a foreign restaurant and in some ways no longer functions as one (Nicholas Kristof, New York Times). The hamburger, is, in many Asian countries, no longer considered as being a foreign import, and the people consider it as something familiar and ordinary.

As an example, Bak (1997) discusses in *Golden Arches East* the situation in South Korea. McDonald’s did not enter South Korea until quite later compared to other Asian countries. The first store opened in 1988, which is five years later than the first store

* also referred to as lifestyling by Gerke (2000), signifying a superficial activity with no real consumption deriving from economic well being.

opened in Thailand. The growth in South Korea has been much slower than expected, and McDonald's found itself in a predicament adapting its business according to the Korean's ways of using restaurants as leisure centers. Initially, customers would not treat the food at McDonald's as a meal, and instead buy very little and sit around for extensive periods of time. So McDonald's had to negotiate its way through discourses about the national and the global as well as accept the fact that consumers in Korea had a significant role in constituting the spaces of individual restaurants (Collins, 154.) Today, McDonald's is thriving in South Korea, so much so that its restaurants are considered important landmarks in cities like Seoul. Yet as Sangmee Bak (1997) notes,

...while it may be hard to convince young South Korean children that McDonald's is not part of their 'indigenous food culture,' the particular process of indigenization in this case has meant that the ways that McDonald's is familiar in South Korea were never predetermined and reflect the fact that the outcomes of globalization processes are always, without a doubt, spatially variable.

Watson places great emphasis on McDonald's as being 'a big treat' for low-income people, and as that of 1994, a dinner at McDonald's for a Chinese family of three normally cost one-sixth of a worker's monthly salary (Watson 1998: 5). He states that the price is not the reason why the Chinese frequent McDonald's, and it is common for families to cut back their expenses in other areas to be able to afford a meal at McDonald's. Young Chinese couples frequent McDonald's due to the fact that they consider the environment to be romantic and comfortable, and that no man will lose face in this particular foreign cultural context. Chinese children are loyal McDonald's fans, and the manner in which they are able to play while eating, creates the perception of a 'children's paradise.' Watson (2006: 49) mentioned that a "Trade Area Survey" conducted by the management of Beijing McDonald's found that, by 1993, a whopping 38.3 per cent of the population frequented McDonald's four times a month or more

frequently. Watson explained this by stating that the younger generation, who have the funds to visit McDonald's on more than one occasion, and who are the people who visit McDonald's and other fast food outlets such as KFC, most frequently, wish to be 'connected the outside world, and eating at these venues has become an integral part of their daily lives. It is a way for them to take part in the transnational cultural system.

However, during the last few years, Chinese leaders have started to show concern over the large number of foreign food firms setting foot on their soil. The leaders have started taking the position of those who have long equated McDonald's with cultural imperialism.* As Ronald Steel commented in the New York Times,

It was never the Soviet Union, but the United States itself that is the true revolutionary power. We purvey a culture based on mass entertainment and mass gratification. The cultural message we transmit through Hollywood and McDonald's goes out across the world to capture, and also to undermine, other societies. Unlike more traditional conquerors, we are not content merely to subdue others: We insist that they be like us (Watson 1998: 5).

Watson then goes on to ask whether or not the spread of fast food actually undermines the integrity of indigenous cuisine, and if Western fast food as a global culture would be better suited to the needs of a capitalist world order. While his findings show that McDonald's has effected small but influential changes in Asian dietary patterns, while at the same time consumers have transformed their local McDonald's branch into local institutions. While 'fast food' in the United States may imply that it is too be consumed rapidly, this might not be the case everywhere, and people use the concept and space of McDonald's in a manner which suits them the best.

* A new form of exploitation that results from the exports of popular culture from the United States, Japan, and Europe to other parts of the world (Watson 1998: 5).

2.5 Western Fast Food Outlets in Bangkok

Over the last few years, and since the introduction of KFC onto the Thai scene in 1982, the number of Western fast food restaurants opening branches in Thailand, and especially, Bangkok, have been booming. McDonald's entered the scene in 1983 after having watched the fast food market carefully over the last six years (McKinney 1983: 32 as quoted in Van Esterik 1992). The fast food outlets Pizza Hut, Pizza Company, Burger King, Subway, Dunkin' Donuts and most recently the glazed doughnuts from Krispy Kreme. When Krispy Kreme first opened in 2011 at the upscale shopping center, SiamParagon, some individuals had to queue for as long as six hours to get a taste of the donuts. The fact that Dunkin Donuts had a stall just a hundred meters from Krispy Kreme in the same venue and with no queue, signifies that Thai consumers are eager to buy into the 'newness' factor and the 'exclusive' taste of a 'foreign' product. The allure of novelty makes the Krispy Kreme a much more tempting alternative, despite having to queue for hours on end.

2.6 Public Eating

Until about forty years ago, the choice of restaurants in Bangkok included a few luxurious Chinese restaurants and three hotel restaurants serving western food (Van Esterik, 1992). The Chinese food culture came into play when the Chinese immigrated to Thailand in a period of societal reconstruction, bringing their own customers and traditions along with them, and the cuisine was favoured by the Siam Royal Kitchen in the reign of King Rama III, and His Majesty fed the food to monks in the Chinese New Year (Suwanloang, 2006).

Small restaurants selling Chinese dishes could also be found, but it was not until after WWII that an increasing number of restaurants opened in Bangkok. In that period, Chinese restaurants were popular, and you could often find Chinese noodle shops and Thai curry shops selling food, side by side. Their clientele, often dubbed 'the plastic-bag

housewives,’ would get prepared items from these stalls to take home from work, and serve it with rice, which they themselves are likely to have boiled.

Gisele Yasmeen (2006) conducted a study on public eating in urban Thai society, which she referred to as ‘Bangkok’s Foodscape.’ In this study she tries to make sense of the complex origins of the phenomenon of public eating by studying eating habits from a geographical perspective. There had previously been done very little work on eating habits from a spatial perspective, and by studying the habits of selling and consuming prepared food outside of the home, Yasmeen (2006) was able to examine public eating habits. Small restaurants, food centers and larger more expensive establishments play an important part in Thai urban eating habits, and convenience is crucial. Yasmeen (2006) found that while the poorest urbanites continue to cook for themselves, most men and women have incomes that allow for purchasing prepared food. As you can see from the following table, 48% of the monthly food budget in Greater Bangkok is spent on pre-cooked comestibles. Van Esterik (1992) found that the trend for purchasing prepared food initially began in the post-Second World War period, and has continued to grow since then as women enter the workforce to a greater extent.

**2.1 Table Average Monthly Expenditure per Household by
Type of Food Consumed, 1990**

Type of food consumed	All-Thailand	Greater-Bangkok
Food prepared at home	1,494 Baht (76%)	1,616 Baht (52.3%)
Prepared food taken home	173 Baht (8.8%)	457 Baht (14.8%)
Food eaten away from home	300 Baht (15.2%)	1014 Baht (32.9%)

Source: National Statistics Office, Office of the Prime Minister, Preliminary report of ' the 1990 Household Socio-economic survey. Excludes alcoholic drinks away from Home

In Yasmeen’s study (2006), she discusses at length the industrialization and urbanization of society, how it becomes ‘uprooted’ from its agricultural way of life and where food becomes a commodity purchased from the market. Below is a table showing

average weekly expenditures on other expensive categories for food eating away from home. As can be seen, the majority of breakfast and lunch meals are consumed away from the home, while dinner is still usually consumed at home.

2.2 Average Weekly Expenditures for Prepared Food Eaten Away from Home, Greater Bangkok, 1990

Expense Category	Expenditure	% of total
Breakfast	41.97	16.2
Lunch	163.04	63
Dinner	34.56	13.4
Snacks	3.01	1.16
Alcoholic Drinks	14.81	5.73
Other Food and Beverage	1.3	0.5
Total	258.69	100

Source: National Statistics Office, Office of the Prime Minister, Report of the 1990 Socio-Economic Survey: Bangkok Metropolis, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, and Samut Prakan, 1994:17

This third table below shows how people feel about ‘eating out.’ It appears that eating out is a family activity, allowing one to spend more time with spouse or children, and that it is a suitable activity for special occasions (Yasmeen, 2006). It appears to be an activity people correlate with good experiences, despite homemade food being perceived as healthier.

Table 2.3 Attitudes Toward Eating Out, All-Thailand

Source: Marilyn Walker, The Food Consumption Survey, 1990.

Yasmeen (2006) elaborates on Van Esterik's findings with regards to the post-Second World war period by explaining the shift in society with regards to consumption as women enter the workforce. For instance, she talks about how '7-11' has made impressive inroads over the last 14 years, and how convenience stores have multiplied rapidly in the last ten years. The domination of local conglomerates seems to be a general feature of the food in Asia. Korea Newsreview (1996) writes about the man who owns '7-11' as well as other large franchises,

Statement	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
Eating at home is better than eating out	88%	8%	4%
Eating out provides a more pleasant atmosphere	65%	23%	13%
Eating out allows more time with family	94%	4%	1%
Eating out gives more Variety	80%	12%	8%
Home food is higher quality	94%	13%	3%
Like to eat out on special occasions.	69%	15%	17%

Take Thailand's Charoen PokPhand, Asia's biggest animal-feed supplier and the country's largest conglomerate, with sales of about US\$5 billion. Boasting that "from farmyard to dinner table it is Charoen Pokphand all the way," the company which was set up by Chinese emigrants, produces feed for and then raises and processes broiler chickens. It also handles prawns and pigs. One of its greatest assets is a network of feed mills and poultry-processing plants

sprinkled across China. These and Charoen Pokphand's fast food joint ventures with America's Kentucky Fried Chicken should allow it to cash in on the country's culinary revolution.

The restaurant culture has changed ever since the new Thai middle class emerged. Now there are expensive restaurants and other forms of conspicuous consumption, which help contribute to the construction of an elite identity (Walker, 1990.) This identity revolves around the accumulation of wealth and status, worldliness and a reconstruction of 'Thainess' that emphasizes the traditional arts, such as cooking, classical dancing and certain religious images (Askew, 1994: Walker: 1991.) As can be seen in table 2.3, while eating at home is likely to provide you with better food, eating out is enjoyable in other ways, such as with a pleasant atmosphere and variety.

Now that consumers are starting to choose eating places based on comfort levels and convenience, such as air conditioned food court, some are worried that the street food culture might disappear. The following is what E.N. Anderson wrote about the changes that are taking place within the Hong Kong food scene:

The worst thing that could happen in the future, in my opinion, would be the disappearance of working-class street food. The street-stalls and tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurants that used to make noodles, won ton, pao, congee, stuffed dumplings, steamed meatballs, fried pastries and thousands of other snack items could be at risk in the new, affluent world of the future. They are in no danger of disappearing, but they are becoming rarer and being influenced by the big restaurants' corner-cutting, sodium loving ways. Much interest has belatedly been devoted to these wonderful foods, among the high points of Chinese cooking. Yet people seem less than aware of the food in question. Chinese are apt to write them off as poverty food, and Westerners often are never introduced to them. Countless tourists have complained to me about the quality of food in the People's Republic: all of them, it turned out, had eaten in the large Western-oriented hotels and restaurants, which have altered the food to please the

Western palate and which feeds hundred at a meal. I even heard that the old food stalls are gone and one can no longer get small eats in China. But on my travels, I found that small eats existed in every form. Street pushcarts, small cafes, workers' dining halls, and snack bars sold them, as good as anything comparable in Hong Kong or Taiwan. Certainly the best food I ate in China outside a few private homes. E.N. Anderson, *The Food of China* (1988).

Yasmeen (2006) also places great emphasis on the role of the woman in both the culture of production and consumption. She says that women form the majority of employees in food processing and food services. This accounts for both the post-industrial and industrializing economies, and is a result of the stereotyping of the female role in Thai society. Thailand has the highest female labour force participation rates in Southeast Asia (Yasmeen 2006: 71), and hence women play an important role providing for their families. As with my case study informants, they are hard working, and this list of factors leads one to believe in equality in the region,

Chiang Mai women are impressive. They have the strength of character, independence, and self-assurance of women who live in a society where they are in a strong position. Residence here is matrilineal. The daughters stay at home and the husbands come in to live with them. Inheritance is bilateral, and the women share equally with the men; daughters inherit the parental home and matrilineal ancestors. In case of divorce, it is the man who must leave and the women must stay home. Women work in the fields, rear the children, keep house: they are also the merchants who earn money for the family selling in the markets. They are the ones who keep the money, for fear that their men will waste it on drinking or gambling, or on other women. There are many strong men in Chiang Mai village, but what impresses a Westerner outsider is the strength of a woman. (Potter, 1976: 2 as quoted in Yasmeen 2006: 95).

2.7 Transnationalism

By the term *transnationalism*, we refer to the human activities and social institutions that extend across national boundaries. The term is closely related to the discourse of globalization, and the two terms often overlap. However, it must be mentioned, that for many transnationalists, at least their focus is to move away from the excessive abstraction in discourses about globalization (Conradson and Latham: as quoted in Collins, 2008: 152.) In the book ‘The Globalization of Food’ (2009: 65 - 70), Marianne Elisabeth Lien from the University of Oslo discusses the matter of transnational flow through the lens of Atlantic salmon. Lien mentions that food and technology travel, they also change meaning, and their uses and modes of appropriation become different (e.g. Lien and Nerlich, 2004.) Lien states that we need to challenge what is often a simplistic ordering of the world through the attribution of local and global qualities to items which are in fact, more complex. There are a variety of food products that are neither local nor global, but belong to both hemispheres. The connection between place and identities is jeopardized by what critic Frederic Jameson defined as the ‘postmodern hyperspace,’ which has finally succeeded in transcending the capacity of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize immediate surroundings, perceptively and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world (Jameson, 1984: 83.) Some perceive this tendency as the ultimate triumph of Western universalism and cultural imperialism,

At work as well as in the obscuration of place is the universalism inherent in Western culture from the beginning. This universalism is most starkly evident in the search for ideas, usually labeled ‘essences’ that obtains everywhere and for which a particular somewhere, a given place, is presumably irrelevant... The age of exploration has begun, an area in which the domination of native people was accomplished by their deplacialization: the systematic destruction of regional landscapes that served as the concrete setting for local cultures (Casey: 12).

A variety of products today operate in a space where the global and local intermingle, so that the very concept of national border evaporates, and the frame of transnationalization is promoted. It offers a useful lens for conceiving changing foodways in at least two important and inter-related ways: the reproduction of familiar food cultures for migrants abroad and the transnationalism embedded in spaces of commodity cultures (Collins, 2006). Transnational food items often provide the consumer with a feeling of familiarity, which is an important aspect in this thesis.

2.8 Consumption and Public Culture in India and China

Because of the limited research done on the topic of fast food and globalized consumption in Thailand, again we have to turn our attention towards other Asian countries. Jackson (2005) conducted research on the geography of the transnational consumer culture in Mumbai. Jackson and his fellow researchers (Phil Crang, Claire Dwyer and Nicole Thomas) challenged the simple mapping of tradition and modernity onto 'East' and 'West.' The respondents were generally proud of both their local and international cuisine. They said that they ate anything and everything, and they spoke about the localization of their pizza, which they added different curries onto, and the addition of garlic and chili sauces onto McDonald's. This can be compared to the situation in Thailand, where one can order tom yam pizza and rice dishes at McDonald's.

Beverly Hooper (2000) found evidence of hybridization, indigenization and resistance to the penetration of foreign goods in China. As we already saw in chapter one, Cadbury's chocolate faced some difficulties when they entered the market, and this hostility seems to expand to other foreign brands trying to achieve a market share. According to Hooper (2000), there is strong resistance to Western brands in China. She reported seeing a sign with the text "I'd rather die of thirst than drink Coca Cola." I'd rather starve to death than to eat McDonald's." Both the media and the public promote local products and refer to foreign goods as 'invaders.' In competing with KFC, local brands has made similar products with a marinade that they claim 'is more suitable for

local tastes.’ Foreign brands in China seem to meet much more hostility than that in Thailand. In addition, a large part of the population, according to Louisa Chein’s study (1999), cannot afford the products and use television in the form of spectatorships as opposed to going out and purchasing the items. Consumers then enter the virtual commodity space without the goods being physically present. This is an intensely ‘local’ form of consumption in the sense that the meaning of particular goods are shaped by specific cultural forces (Jackson, 2004). Louia Chein found that this form of consumption of luxury goods were accessed via magazines and satellite television. This could be compared to Thai women living in Isan, without the resources to purchase any high end products, but with the television that they watch glamorous advertisements on.

The social practices in this form of ‘unreal’ consumption involves the social practices of yearning and longing. Whereas this longing can be compared to the Western way of longing for a products when seeing it in the media, the difference is that these Asian consumer know that they will never be able to afford them.

Chapter III

The Six Case Studies

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates at the same time. (Arendt, 1958)

In the following chapter there are six case studies. Each case study was selected from a group of ten possible informants, partly based on their willingness to participate in this study. Each informant is between the ages of 30 and 50, and each informant is from the northeastern region of Thailand. They have all lived in Bangkok for at least ten years, and they are all the main breadwinners of their respective families. While I was able to visit the hometown of four of the possible six informants, I made sure to conduct additional extensive open-ended interviews with the two informants I was not able to visit. The four visits were conducted between October of 2011 and January of 2012.

In addition to each informant's willingness to participate in this study, I chose each informant based on their interest and curiosity towards Western fast food, as well as their alternative perspectives on Western fast food that might differ from the rest of the case study informants. The informants frequent Western fast food venues for different reasons and on different occasions, and the fact that they are willing to spend a part of their limited budget on this Western food, which they did not grow up with and only became familiar with once they moved down to the capital, might provide us with a better understanding of how and why these women incorporate this food into their everyday lives. By providing an in-depth picture of each case study's background and current lifestyle, we might be able to draw a multi-faceted conclusion regarding the impact the Western fast food has on the case study informants' lives, and how this process takes place. Do they use the Western fast food as a way to distance themselves from their own "lower class" by saying that they are enjoying expensive taste, or are they merely

consuming the food for the taste while at the same time enjoying the benefits that come with visiting a Western fast food establishment?

3.1 Case 1 - Lek, Sisaket

3.1.1 Historical Background

Lek is a 38-year-old female from the district of Prang Ku in the province of Sisaket. Sisaket is located in the valley of the Mun river, which is the largest tributary of the Mekong river. The province borders Yasothorn to the north, Ubon Ratchatani to the east, Surin to the west and Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear of Cambodia to the south. And it is in Oddar Meanchey of Cambodia where you find the mountain chain of Dangrek, which forms the border between the two countries. Sisaket is divided into 20 districts, and has a geographic area of close to 9000 square kilometers. The province dates back as far as the Khmer empire, as evidenced by the Khmer-style archaeological remains found in the province. It is believed that the province was at that time sparsely populated, although today it has a total population of 1,405,500, which ranks it as the 9th most populated province in Thailand. While the majority of the population in Sisaket speak a dialect of Laotian, there is a sizeable Northern Khmer population living there, and over 26 percent of the locals speak Khmer. Lek and her family are included in these 26 percent.

3.1.2 Lek's Family Relations

Lek is the oldest of three siblings. She has two younger brothers, who are both single. The youngest brother recently turned 30, and lives at home with their parents in Sisaket. The oldest is 34 and has been ordained as a Buddhist monk. He is currently living in a local temple in Sisaket. Lek's mother and father are aged 60 and 70, respectively. Neither Lek nor her siblings have children, and her parents are expecting

Lek to give them grandchildren soon. Although Lek is currently single, she is hoping to get married and have children in the foreseeable future, just like her parents want for her. Her parents currently reside in a rather new house in Sisaket, on the same property as the house where Lek and her siblings grew up in. It was Lek and her mother who bought this new house together by taking up a loan from the bank. While Lek's mother covered the majority of the down payment, it is Lek's responsibility to pay back the rest of the loan in installments, making payments at the end of every three months. The house is currently in her mother's name, but her mother has promised Lek that as soon as she has paid back the loan on the house, she will put the house in Lek's name. Lek, therefore, considers the house to be hers.

Lek is the only person in her family who has a steady income. Growing up, her parents would support her and her siblings by working in the rice fields near their home. Her father, who is now a retired musician, would from time to time be asked to perform at various events, but it did not pay well and the gigs were few and far between. On occasion, they had to sell all the rice that they had harvested without being able to keep some for themselves and for their children to eat. This led to them having to borrow rice from neighbors to be able to feed the family. Their neighbors who had lent them the rice would, in turn, demand that Lek's parents would give them back twice as much rice as they had initially borrowed. Lek said,

We were poor. I just could not handle this level of poverty, so even though I wanted to study, I knew that I would have to leave school as soon as possible and start working. It was not like my parents could afford to continue sending me to school anyway. Having to borrow rice is pretty humiliating, and I wanted to find a way to support my parents so that they did not have to feel the shame of not being able to feed their children. We never actually had to eat soil, but it was not far from it, and I knew people who did. We were always just a little bit hungry, and I never want my family to have to live like that again. So now I help out in every way I can.

Today, both of Lek's parents are retired, and receive monthly pensions. The amount they receive is equivalent to their age times ten, which makes their current combined income out to be 1300 baht per month. Lek's youngest brother, according to Lek, spends his days doing nothing but eat and sleep, and does not appear interested in doing any kind of paid work. And because the oldest brother spends his days in a temple without any form of income, Lek is, indubitably, the sole breadwinner of the family. Her family is entirely dependent on her sending money back home at the end of each month, and her mother demands that she sends back no less than 75 per cent of her current salary. Lek, who currently makes 15,000 baht per month as a live-in maid for a Dutch family in Bangkok, is therefore forced to send back over 10,000 baht a month, in addition to having to cover the installments for their house in Sisaket, where her parents and her brother live. Her mother knows exactly how Lek budgets her money, and Lek does very rarely get the chance to buy items for herself, such as clothing, which is not included in her monthly budget. If there is anything she wants to purchase, such a new shirt, she has to purchase it as soon as possible after receiving her salary. She never spends more than 200 baht on a piece of clothing, and she buys every item from street markets, because she believes it to be cheaper than buying it from a store. Even the supercenters such as Big C or Tesco Lotus, are too expensive for Lek. Although she does think that her mother asks for too much of her salary, she says,

I would never keep anything from my parents. It is just not an option. I tell her exactly how much I make, and that is how it has to be. There are no secrets, and I would never consider telling her anything but the truth. I do not really talk about money with my father, but I am sure my mother tells him everything.

Lek's role as the breadwinner of the family comes with responsibilities. Both her parents and her siblings see her as 'the leader' of the family, and when decisions have to be made relating to family matters, they all consult Lek. Her mother, though, has recently realized that she needs to assist her daughter in covering their costs of living, and has

started working as a cleaner at a local primary school in Sisaket. As the school has hired her on a freelance basis, they are not required to pay her the minimum wage of 300 baht per day. Lek's mother, therefore, makes a meager 130 baht per day. She spends this money on rice and other essential items for the family, which lessens the financial pressure on Lek. Unfortunately, when the school is closed during the holidays, which accounts for about 2 months a year, Lek's mother does not receive a daily wage, and is again, solely dependent on Lek. Lek shared her thoughts on her role as the breadwinner of the family,

I dropped out of school after B6* to support my family. At the time, my parents could not afford for me to continue my education, and so I had no other choice but to find work. I used to work at a bakery making 500 baht a Month. My father is an alcoholic, and I know he spends a large portion of my salary on alcohol. I have worked since I was six years old. I had to walk two kilometers every day only to get water from the well. I have worked in the rice fields before school, and after school I had to cook food for my parents when they returned from the rice fields. Once, I cannot have been much older than 7, I had forgotten to put the rice on and my father slapped me across the face. I can remember it like it was yesterday. And I can tell you, it happened more than once. I also had to care for my younger brothers while my parents were working, especially the youngest. That might explain why he always comes to me for advice and does not do much around the house.

Lek has, since she left Sisaket, completed middle school by taking weekend classes in Bangkok. She has been my student since late 2008, and she is determined to attend class every Sunday, despite being incredibly busy with work and her evening classes. She is currently working towards getting the equivalent of her high school diploma, and hopes to graduate soon. She is hoping to someday go to university and get a

* The equivalent of 6th grade.

bachelor's degree like most of her friends. She says that her ultimate goal would be to move back to her home province of Sisaket and work as a primary school teacher while at the same time caring for her parents. Her passion is working with children, and she also talks passionately about having children of her own some day,

Of course I want to have children. I am not getting any younger, and I am hoping and praying that it will happen soon. The only thing I worry about is the price of having children. You have to buy diapers and food, and it is certainly not cheap. At least I can produce my own milk. I need to find a way to budget my Money for my parents and for my future children. Hopefully I can find a husband who understands how important it is that I support my family, and who can help out financially as well.

3.1.3 Food Habits/Eating Habits

The cuisine in Sisaket is similar to that of Cambodia, which includes eating jasmine rice at every meal. They generally tend to prefer Thai food* to Isan food, and coconut milk is a common ingredient in most households. They eat with cutlery instead of eating with their hands, although they have only started using cutlery over the course of the last few years. While growing up in Sisaket, Lek would, exclusively, eat jasmine rice. It was not until she moved to Bangkok that got to taste sticky rice, and quickly developed a taste for the spicy Isan cuisine. She says that these days, she much prefers Isan food to Thai food. She elaborated,

When I first started working in the Nike factory in Bangkok, which was my first and only factory job, I got into a relationship with another employee from Isan. He would only eat Isan food, and so I started eating Isan food. We lived together

* mostly food with a smooth and lasting taste with a touch of sweetness.

for many years, and so it was only natural that I ate what he ate. At the factory food court, they would have a variety of Isan foods. I love sticky rice. I am the only one in my family who eats sticky rice as part of my meals. I just find it so satisfying. My boyfriend left me after ten years together, and I decided to leave the factory soon thereafter. I have not seen him since then. But I still eat Isan food on a daily basis. I do not really care for Thai food anymore, and I certainly do not like dishes containing coconut milk. Cows' milk, on the other hand, is something I like.

Prior to working as a maid in Bangkok, Lek would only eat Isan food and Thai food. After seeing her most recent employer having bread and cheese for breakfast every morning, she herself has gotten a taste for these items. She has replaced her daily bowl of breakfast rice with a small baguette with butter and cheese and a cup of hot coffee. She cannot afford the nice, imported cheese that her boss buys for herself at one of the more upscale supermarkets, and so Lek has found a cheaper alternative in pre-sliced, individually wrapped cheese, which she claims tastes just as good as the cheese her boss eats. Not a day goes by that she does not eat a buttered baguette with cheese and a cup of coffee. I asked if she had ever had the chance to try coffee from one of the larger chain coffee bars, such as Starbucks, and she replied that she had never tried it, and although it seems like a nice experience, it is so not worth the money. She spends about 45 Baht per day on her breakfast, and is her most expensive meal of the day.

For lunch she will buy food from the street in front of one of the major shopping centers near her workplace. She usually buys papaya salad and sticky rice, and sometimes some fried chicken wings. Occasionally she might also buy laab namtok^{*} with a side of sticky rice. Apart from her daily breakfast cheese baguette, Lek buys the majority of her meals from street vendors. Because of her long working hours, she purchases most of her meals in the area around her workplace. She is allowed to eat her meals at work, although her boss prefers her to eat her meals outside. If she brings her meals back to work to eat,

* A minced meat salad regarded as a national dish of Laos. The meat is minced with chilis, mint and sometimes assorted vegetables.

she has to sit in the kitchen, just next to the washing machine while eating. She is not allowed to eat anything at the house, which leaves a smell, such as papaya salad with fermented fish or durian. She has a rice cooker in her room, but for some reason her boss does not approve of her using it, yet she is not allowed to use the kitchen, so she frequently finds herself in a bit of a predicament.

On her days off, she will visit Isan style cafés with her friends, KFC or pizza restaurants, depending on if she has any Money left to spend. About once every two weeks she eats spicy spaghetti, which she buys at food courts. She says that it is more like Thai food, and that she prefers the consistency of spaghetti to jasmine rice. She mentions that some of her friends are also fond of this spaghetti, and they will on occasion order it in bulk. She also likes to spend time at food courts,

I often bring a book or a magazine with me, and I will read it after I have finished my meal. It is my quiet time. There are no people to disturb you or tell you to leave, much like a fast food restaurant, only significantly cheaper. And I do not mind the noise. It is actually not that bad.

Lek is extremely fond of pizza, and she often visits Pizza Company* with her friends at the beginning of each month, when she has just received her salary. She prefers Pizza Company to other pizza establishments, such as Pizza Hut, because of their reasonable prices and frequent promotions. She does mention visiting Pizza Company more frequently during their ‘two for one’ promotion, which takes place every year over the course of a month. Lek looks forward to this period, and is always planning in advance as to which pizza to order. She talks in lengths about her love for pizza and how she wishes she could eat it more frequently,

*An affordable restaurant chain based in Bangkok with focus on pizza and Italian-American cuisine.

I remember the first time I had pizza. I was working at the Nike sweatshop, and one of my coworkers suggested that we should go for pizza. It was heaven. Ever since that first bite, I keep coming back for more. There is just something about the combination of dough and cheese that I absolutely love. I cannot afford it often, but when I have a bit of money to spend, I buy pizza. I do not like to visit Pizza Company with friends who are too concerned about getting fat though. I just want to eat the pizza and enjoy it, although I seldom eat more than two slices. Thinking about the calories takes the fun out of the experience, and I do not want my friends to judge me. Luckily I have a friend who is just as crazy about pizza as I am. If we really want to indulge, we will order delivery and share a whole pizza between just the two of us at home. That way, nobody can judge us and we can binge to our heart's content. And of course we order a set, so we get spaghetti and chicken wings on the side. There is no wonder I have gained a few pounds over the last couple of years.

When asked to list three reasons why she loves pizza, Lek immediately responds; it is fast, it is delicious and it keeps me full for a long time. She says that she also likes the chicken at KFC, but prefers Pizza Company because of the dough and the cheese. She mentions that she would never visit a fast food restaurant by herself, and that part of the experience is going with a friend and sharing a meal. Lek is not able to reveal the exact amount she spends on pizza and other fast food a month, but that she tries to budget it into the 3000 baht she spends on food for the whole month. If she goes over budget, after having sent money home to her parents and having paid all her bills, she is willing to eat canned sardines with rice and some fruit for a relatively long period of time.

3.1.4 Lek's Cooking Job

In September of 2011, Lek started working as a live-in helper for a Dutch family in Bangkok. The husband works for a major sport's brand company, and the wife is a stay-at-home mother of three children. Lek's responsibilities involve cooking, cleaning

and looking after the children. Her working hours are from 7am to 7pm, but she is often forced to work overtime without receiving any financial compensation. The mother also demands that Lek works a few nights a week, which is when the mother goes out drinking, often with the husband, and wants Lek to tend to the children while she is gone. Lek does receive a small compensation for this added work, but only after having personally complained about it to her boss. Due to the fact that she resides at their house, it is difficult to decline any chores they might add to her workload. She does not have a written contract, and when I have asked her about this in the past, she would laugh and say that the family she works for would never agree to such a thing, that no maid living in Bangkok has such a contract. And besides, if a better offer came along and she wanted to leave this family, she could.

Lek says that she much prefers working as a nanny as opposed to in a factory or in any other establishment where she would be required to wear a uniform. She says,

Now I just wear jeans and a t-shirt to work. I have worn uniforms in the past, and I absolutely despised it. When I put on a uniform, it is like someone else owns me, and I hate that. My family is the only people who control what I do, and they are the only people I have to answer to.

It was during one of my discussions with Lek that I was able to experience her relationship with her current boss first hand. I had requested Lek to meet me on a Saturday. She asked her boss if she could be excused a little early on that day as she wanted to meet with me, and her boss told her that if she had completed all of her chores, she was free to go. We met at approximately 7pm, and an hour or so into the interview, Lek's boss sends her a text message asking her to baby-sit on that particular night. The boss had not mentioned this before Lek left work, and so Lek replied that she was working with me and unfortunately would not be available. A few minutes later, her boss calls her demanding that she returns to the house within an hour, and Lek is forced to oblige. Lek says,

I am lucky that I get the salary that I get, and my boss demands a lot from me because of it. But I am dependent on the salary, so I just have to do as they say. I always do as they say. And it makes my mother happy. That is all I want.

Lek is responsible for purchasing groceries for the family once a week. She is given up to 4000 baht, sometimes no more than 3000 baht, to buy groceries to feed a family of five for an entire week. She visits Big C^{*}, and sometimes buys food along the street if she can find a good deal. She can not afford to buy any items from the more upscale food markets, such as Villa Market, and lets her boss buy her own cheese and other imported goods in her own time. Although Lek finds herself from time to time in a taxi because of the heavy shopping bags, her boss encourages her to take the bus home with an entire week's worth of groceries, and seems pleased when she does so. Lek makes every dish for the family from scratch, and is not allowed to buy anything ready-made to prepare in the kitchen. The family prefers Western food as well as Thai dishes containing coconut milk, such as massaman^{*} curry and green curry. They have very specific requirements as to what ingredients Lek can and cannot use in her cooking, and Lek has to be extra careful that she does not incorporate any of these 'unwanted' ingredients in her cooking.

Because Lek receives a salary of 15,000 baht a month, which according to Lek and to other maids I have spoken to, is considered decent for a helper, especially for someone who lives with the family, there are certain restrictions she has to abide by. She has to buy her own meals, and she is not allowed to eat any of the food she makes for the family. She said,

* A reasonably priced 'supercenter' selling products from fresh food, clothing to electric appliances.

* A curry dish that is Muslim in origin. It contains ingredients including coconut milk, roasted peanuts or cashews, potatoes, bay leaves, cardamom pods, cinnamon, star anise, palm sugar, fish sauce, chili and tamarind sauce.

I asked if I could eat some of their leftover food once, but they told me that they wanted to keep it for the next day. So now I do not dare to ask if I can taste anything else. I taught myself how to make farang food* after I started working for this family, and I make dishes such as lasagna and hamburgers. The kids love my hamburgers, and for the madam, I will add extra vegetables to the lasagna, as her general diet is very healthy. I also reduce the amount of cheese needed. She seems to appreciate that. Of course I taste the food before I serve it, but I have never had a full portion of anything I have made. It would have been nice to taste it, but they would never let me. I always buy my own rice, and my boss will interrogate me, making sure I do not take any of their rice, before bringing it up to my room. I would never do such a thing. In the past, they have even insinuated that I stole their iPad, and when they found it, they did mention it again. However, they do buy me instant coffee and mama noodles,* which I should be grateful for. Actually, I cannot stand any kind of noodle dish, so I rarely eat any of the ramen noodles. I do drink several cups of coffee a day though.

3.1.5 The Phi Ta Khon Festival

Lek claims that she hates traveling, and only visits her parents once or twice a year. And because of her limited budget and her mother's desire and need for money, her family prefers that she sends money home instead of spending money on a bus ticket. She does, however, have to travel home in September during the 'festival of the dead,' which takes place in Sisaket and is a Khmer tradition. This is when Lek and all her living relatives have to help make food offerings to the deceased members of their families. The festival lasts for two days, and on the first day they have to prepare food to offer to the ghosts. On the second day, they will make offerings at the local temple as well as offer food to deceased relatives by scattering the food around their paddy fields. The foods they prepare include roasted chicken, pork, rice soup, various vegetables and desserts.

* Food often believed to be eaten by people of European ancestry.

* A brand of instant noodles popular in Thailand.

They will make offerings to every single deceased relative starting at the top of the family's lineage. Forgetting a name is believed to cause a cursing by the deceased ancestor. Mon tells me about the joy of the festival,

For some it might sound a little morbid, but it is actually a very colorful festival. As a part of the Kui,* we have to partake in this festival. There is plenty of food, for the living and the deceased alike. People wear their original Khmer costumes, and it is a chance to celebrate our heritage and honor our deceased relatives. Everyone is carrying food and wine, and we all gather and enjoy each other's company. We have to wake up very early, but I am used to that, so it is not really a big deal.

Although I have not yet received an invitation to visit Lek and her family as their new house is still under construction, I have requested to visit them during the festival of the dead next year.

3.2 Case 2 – Kung, Roi-Et

3.2.1 Historical Background

Kung is a 31-year-old female from the district of Kaset Wisai in the province of Roi-Et. Roi-Et is located in the northeastern region of Thailand, and is situated approximately 500 kilometers from Bangkok. It is divided into 20 districts, and it has a geographic area of over 8,000 square kilometers. The province borders Kalasin to the north, Maha Sarakham to the west, Surin to the south and Yasothorn to the east. Despite modern developments having replaced the ancient civilization, making it nearly impossible to find any remains from ancient times, ruins from the period of the Khmer

* A group of Khmer speaking people who are living in Sisaket, Surin, Buriram and the southern part of the Isan region.

empire have been found in Roi-Et. The current location of Roi-Et was established by King Taksin over 200 years ago, and at that time, Roi-Et was known as Sakhet Nakhon. Sakhet Nakhon had 11 cities under its control while being protected by 11 city gates. Roi Et in Thai means ‘one hundred and one,’ and it is widely believed that the city got its name because in ancient times they wrote the number 11 as 101, meaning ten and one. Although some people in Roi-Et do speak the northern Khmer dialect, in Kaset Wisai, where Kung’s family is from, they speak a dialect of Laotian.

3.2.2 Kung’s Family Relations

Kung is the youngest of five children. She grew up with two older sisters and two older brothers in the same house where her parents still live today. None of her siblings currently reside in Roi-Et, instead they are all living scattered across Thailand. They do return home, however, to visit their parents with their respective families on major holidays, such as during the Songkran festival* and during the New Year holiday. All of Kung’s siblings are married with children, and Kung is the only child remaining who is still single and childless. Her siblings do not have the resources to assist their parents financially as they are preoccupied caring for their own spouses and their own children. Kung has therefore come to accept that caring for their parents is, at the present moment, her sole responsibility and has taken on the role as the breadwinner without complaints. She talks proudly about being responsible for her parents, yet at the same time has not come to terms with her father never thinking that she is doing enough. With tears in her eyes, she reveals her feelings,

Sometimes it feels like my father does not love me the way he loves my siblings.
I want to give my parents the world, but I cannot forget the past. I just want him

* The Thai New Year, celebrated in the month of April.

to accept me. If I could just understand what I could do to make him love me more, then I would do it.

Although Kungs' parents are still working as rice farmers and are raising cattle on the side, they claim that they are financially dependent on Kung. They do not spend a large amount of money in their everyday lives, but as they only receive a meager pension from the government, they are dependent on their children's help. In fact, the first thing Kung's father spoke to me about when I arrived at their house late one evening in October of 2011, was how he was not satisfied with the amount of money she was currently sending home every month. He said,

I wish my daughter (Kung) had a higher income so that she could send us more money. We are always struggling financially, and she is not giving us enough money. It is difficult. I believe she is spending too much money on herself and not thinking about her family. I wish she would find a job that paid more or at least give us more of her earnings. That would make life easier. We live in the poorest part of Thailand. There is never enough money. We have to spend more money now than we ever have.

Kung moved to Bangkok from her parents' house in Roi-Et after having completed the equivalent of 9th grade at the local school in Kaset Wisai. Prior to her departure, there had been a few boys from her local school who had shown an interest in marrying her, but at that time she was not ready to consider marriage, and she did not want to spend the rest of her life in Roi-Et. She does, however, say that she wants to get married some day, and marrying a foreigner is without, a shadow of a doubt, something she would consider. She said,

I cannot imagine living the rest of my life here (Roi-Et). I love to visit my parents and my relatives, but I need more excitement in my life, and I cannot find that here. I knew moving to Bangkok was the right choice for me, even if my parents initially did not want me to leave. I had to go on a hunger strike, which lasted seven days, to make them understand that I would do anything to leave. It took a while, but my parents did eventually let me go. They finally understood how important it was to me, and I do think they appreciate that I can send money home to them on a regular basis.

Growing up in Roi-Et, Kung hardly ever left her parents' house, let alone traveled all the way into Roi-Et town^{*} where she might have been exposed to foods different to that of her local cuisine. As the child of rice farmers, her diet consisted of sticky rice and different kinds of meat and vegetables depending on the season. She never had the opportunity to try any type of food, which was not considered part of her family's everyday diet.

3.2.3 Moving to Bangkok

When Kung first moved to Bangkok at the age of 16 and started working as a nanny for a wealthy Thai-Chinese family, it took months before she felt confident enough to venture out on her own, beyond the end of the street where she both worked and lived. Forward to today, and Kung has become a woman who says that she is not the least apprehensive about traveling around and beyond the city on her own. Today her salary has more than doubled since she first came to Bangkok, and while she will not tell me the exact amount, she claims it is over 20,000 baht a month. She explains,

^{*} The financial district of Roi-Et. It is built around a large artificial lake.

When I first arrived, I was paid less than 10,000 baht a month. I got a pay rise when my boss realized that my two daughters could not live without me. We have grown incredibly close, and they always turn to me for support. I am able to buy more things now, and I spend more money on clothes than I ever have. And I can treat my friends to pizza or Japanese food once in a while. The work is tough though, and sometimes I only get a couple of hours a sleep a night. But at least my boss understands how important my work is and pays me accordingly.

3.2.4 Visiting Kung's home town of Kaset Wisai

I first become acquainted with Kung when she became my student towards the end of 2008. She has remained my student, and in October of 2011, she invited me home to stay with her and her parents for a few days in Roi-Et, while letting me do observational research. We were initially going to take a bus from Bangkok to Roi-Et, but when one of the girls who Kung works and cares for in Bangkok, Bell, wanted to come with us, it was decided that we would travel to Roi-Et in the family's minivan. Kung seemed very excited by this, and said that she was relieved that we did not have to travel by bus. A 16-year-old nanny, Pui, who also worked for the family, and who had just recently moved to Bangkok from Sisaket for work after completing 9th grade, came with us. She was beyond thrilled to leave Bangkok for a few days and said,

Kung got me this job in Bangkok. I did not want to study any more, and so I thought this would be a good opportunity for me. I work for the grandmother of the house, and she is very strict. I get the feeling that I can never do anything right in her eyes. At first she said that I would get one day off a week, but then she had a change of heart, and now I only get one day off a month. I work from 7am to 7pm, sometimes later. My salary is 4000 baht a month, and my mother, who lives back home in Sisaket, wants at least 3000 of those 4000 baht. If I do not send her that much, she tells me that I do not love her. It is excruciating. And

shopping for clothes is my weakness, so I am always struggling to send my mother back as much money as she says she needs. There are so many pretty clothes in Bangkok. Kung tells me that I should give it some time. Perhaps it will get better in a few months time. I have gained so much weight since I arrived. I think it is because I am depressed and I miss my boyfriend.

We left for Roi-Et one early afternoon, and it was a comfortable drive. But because of the heavy Bangkok traffic and our lengthy stop on the way, we did not arrive at Kung's parents' house until past midnight. On the way, we stopped at Tesco Lotus to eat some dinner and to purchase some presents for Kung's parents. As her parents do not drink coffee or tea, I ended up buying a few bags of instant oatmeal drinks, as advised by Kung. We had dinner at MK restaurant, which is famous for their Thai-style suki and roasted duck. Pui, who had never visited MK prior to that, was not impressed with the food and referred to it as 'tasteless.' She said in a quiet voice,

It does not taste much. I do not know. It is not very exciting. If I could choose, I would have picked a place where they have spicier food. That is what I am used to. And the waitress told me that they are out of rice. I have never experienced that at a Thai restaurant before. They are out of rice! I guess I will have to eat noodles.

At our arrival in Kaset Wisai, we were greeted by Kung's parents. As it was very late, we went straight to bed. The ladder up to the 2nd floor was terribly steep, and going both up and down was challenging. I was fortunate enough to have been given the only bed in the house, which Kung usually sleeps in when she is visiting on her own. Kung and the others slept just by the entrance, on thin mattresses and covered in a mosquito netting.

The following morning, we woke up to a motorcycle cart with a selection of bakery goods for sale, parked in front of the house. The owner of the cart boasted that he

had been up since midnight making the pastries. Each item cost no more than 10 baht,* and they were seemingly popular, especially among the children and the elderly. The seller informed me that at the end of each working day, he would be left with between 400 and 500 baht. He would usually have run out of items by 6pm, depending on demand. His costumers did not seem to mind the large amount of flies swarming in and around the pastries, nor the lack of refrigeration of the items. Among the products were banana bread, Isan-style pizza,* doughnuts filled with jam and vanilla sauce as well as tiny sausages sandwiched between two pieces of bread. This particular item was referred to as the ‘hamburger.’

After having treated the kids at the local primary school to pastries from this particular cart two days after our arrival, it became clear the Isan-style pizza and the ‘hamburger’ were among the most popular items. The children seemed very excited about the pastries, and they knew exactly what they wanted from the cart, making it obvious that they had previously purchased these goods. It seemed to be nice change from their regular school lunch meals of sticky rice and meatballs. The school also sold candy and snacks in the cafeteria at a low price, and vendors would visit the school during lunchtime, selling anything from waffles to meat on a stick.

Kung’s parents’ house was located in a rather remote area of Kaset Wisai, just by the rice fields. At the time of my visit, there were no foreigners living there, and when a little boy at the local temple started crying when he saw me, I was told that it was because he had never seen a foreigner before. Several locals also came to say hello while we were staying at Kung’s house. They thought it was exciting, and tried selling me everything from dirty eggs to frog catchers.

* 10 baht is equivalent to 0.3 USD.

* Very soft, cold bread with a topping of something sweet, shaped in the form of pizza slices

3.2.5 Housing and Local Eating Habits

The majority of the people who live in the area are, according to Kung, related to one another. Kung's parents' house has two floors. The first floor is made of concrete cement and is where the parents sleep, while the second floor is entirely made of wood, and is where Kung slept while growing up and still sleeps today when she is visiting her parents. As the youngest daughter, according to local customs, she would not be allowed to sleep downstairs with the parents. And as the youngest daughter, she is as mentioned, responsible for caring for the parents. She keeps mentioning that she would like to buy a new house for her parents, but that it is only a dream, for now. While visiting, Kung bought her father a new motorcycle to replace the one he had been using for the last 17 years. She said,

I hope my father will like the new motorcycle I am going to pick out. Our neighbors, who have children with a university education, always talk to me as if I am not making enough money to provide for my parents. I will show them. I am going to buy everything for my parents that heir children buy for them. I do not want them to look down on us. I do not want to be inferior, and I will show them.

Kung's parents' house has a very basic outdoor kitchen and an outdoor bathroom, which are both located behind the house. They have a regular squat toilet, not very clean and you shower by using a ladle or a bucket to poor water over yourself. The kitchen used to be located indoors where the parents now sleep, but Kung's mother decided that it would be more convenient to cook outside. A few years ago, Kung purchased a gas stove for her parents in order to simplify the cooking process. However, her parents, especially her mother, never grew accustomed to using the gas stove, and today it is only being used when they have guests and someone else than the parents are preparing the food. When there are no guests visiting, Kung's mother cooks every meal over a fire.

It is first and foremost women who work in the kitchen, and the men, according to my observations, only partake in cooking activities when it involves slaughtering a chicken or killing a frog. I only observed the men working at night, while during the day and early in the morning they would sit on the patio in front of the house. Kung shared her memories of spending time in the kitchen as a child,

I started learning how to cook when I started B1.* I guess I was around seven years old. I feel like I spent my entire childhood in this kitchen. Even at such a young age, I was in charge of the cooking. You know, it is important for Thai girls to learn how to *tam gap khao*.* It is my duty as the daughter to go to bed early, and then to get up early to prepare the food. These days I am only responsible for the cooking activities during the Songkran festival. That is when I cook and everyone comes to eat. On all other occasions, my older sister or my brother's wife will cook.

According to local tradition, when family comes to visit, it is always their responsibility to cook. On this occasion, it was the oldest daughter of the house, Kung's oldest sister, who was in charge of running the kitchen while I was visiting. When I went downstairs at 6am on the second day, she was already in the process of preparing breakfast for the entire family, which most of the time during the rainy season consisted of grilled frogs and sticky rice. They would catch the frogs while working in the rice fields, and keep them in a large ceramic container next to the kitchen until they were ready to be killed and then grilled. Luckily, Kung's family did understand that I would not be able to stomach the frog meat, and I was therefore served special dishes in the form of garlic chicken and jasmine rice. Kung claimed that the chicken meat they had at home was very dry and stringy, so she suggested that I should buy my own chicken legs when visiting the local Tesco Lotus express, which I did.

* B1 is short for bpra-tom 1, and is the equivalent of 1st grade.

* to cook, literally translated as 'make with rice.'

The majority of the people in Roi-Et eat sticky rice as opposed to jasmine rice.* When questioned as to why they prefer the former, they tend to reply that sticky rice is more filling and will keep them energized throughout the day. Funnily enough, when I asked the same question to people in other regions where jasmine rice is most common, they said the same thing about jasmine rice. Although they grow both sticky rice and jasmine rice in the fields, they keep the sticky rice for themselves and sell the majority, or approximately 80 percent of the jasmine rice, to buyers. The remaining 20 percent is kept at the house in case they have out of town guests visiting and for donating to the monks. The sticky rice is usually served in beautiful woven bamboo containers, which come in different sizes. Several people are often found to eat sticky rice from the same container over the course of a meal. They usually prepare the sticky rice early in the morning, and then they eat that particular rice throughout the day.

Most of the meals in Kung's parents' house were served on the patio in front of the residence, and everyone would eat with their hands. Men and women would sit together. They would take a piece of sticky rice from the bamboo container, dip it into whatever topping they preferred, often mushroom curry or papaya salad, before devouring it. Even with most liquid items, they would use their hands. If there happened to be, on a rare occasion, a spoon placed in a large bowl of soup, then that spoon would be shared by everyone who were eating the soup. There was also just one or two stainless steel drinking cups, which everyone took turn drinking from. The drink of choice was rainwater, which they kept in a ceramic container. Sometimes, when they would consume dishes special to Isan, such as laab woa,* there would be bloodstains on the sticky rice in the containers from the blood infused dishes. While Kung used to eat dishes containing fresh blood and raw meat when she was still living at home with her parents, she says that after she moved to Bangkok, she can no longer stomach these dishes. She explained,

* Steamed rice. Also known as Thai fragrant rice, because of its subtle nutty flavor and rich aroma.

* raw spicy minced meat salad, a specialty of Isan.

When I was younger and still living in Roi-Et, we did not have a lot of money. We still do not, but I can safely say that we are better off than we were. Now I have more money and I can pick and choose what I want to eat. My parents still eat the same foods they always have and they do not want to try other foods, but my tastes have definitely changed and I am more aware of what I am putting into my body. I do love frog meat, and I still favor the Isan cuisine, but living in Bangkok has certainly made me less interested in eating particular dishes. I do not remember the last time I ate raw meat or something mixed with raw blood. It needs to be properly cooked if I am going to eat it again. I am scared I will get sick, and I no longer trust the hospitals near my home in Roi-Et.

As we visited Kung's parents during the rainy season of 2011, the main source of protein at that time came from frogs and fish. Because of the unfortunate flooding of the rice fields during the rainy season of 2011, fish was in abundance. As we drove around the area, I would see plenty of farmers fishing with a Sadung* in the flooded rice fields. Kung's mother seemed to take pride in the fact that her household is more or less self-sufficient. They harvest their own rice, they grow their own vegetables and fruit, and they hunt and fish their own meat. Until fairly recently, Kung's mother did not use money to get a hold of items she needed. She would trade items with neighbors, and if it had not been for the instances where her neighbors would ask for items, without giving anything in return, she would probably still be solely partaking in non-monetary trade. She believes that money is ruining society,

I used to trade my garlic for other items. But since my neighbors asked for it but never gave me anything in return, I had to start charging actual money. It is sad. I feel like people do not care about each other as much anymore, and it is all about the money. I know Kung feels the same way. But we try to stay as self-sufficient as we possibly can, and I am on my feet all day trying to find things to eat. I just picked some beautiful rare mushrooms in the forest, and I did not have to pay a

* a large fish net.

thing. I hear the selling price in Bangkok is about 700 baht per kilograms for this particular mushroom. Can you believe that?

Within walking distance of Kung's parents' house, there was only one small shop, where they sold items such as toiletries, phone cards, ice-cream cigarettes and drinks. It was the poo-yai-baan, or the head of the area, who ran the shop. A short drive away from the house, next to the local fresh market, there was a 7-11 and a Tesco Express.* It was while visiting this fresh market that we had lunch at a local café. On the menu were local items, such as papaya salad, as well as items that can be found throughout Bangkok, such as fried rice and stir fried meat with holy basil. At the café, I noticed everyone eating with cutlery, but that they used their fingers when taking pieces of sticky rice from the rice container, just like they would do when eating at home. Kung's parents, however, never left the area where they lived, and when asked if they wanted to join us for a meal at a local restaurant, they politely declined.

3.2.6 Western Food in Roi-Et

Just as Kung had not had the opportunity to visit any Western restaurants growing up, the 16-year-old girl who lived next door to Kung's parents, Kai, had also never had the opportunity to frequent Western restaurants. Kung elaborated,

Western food is considered a luxury no one in Roi-Et are willing to pay for. Spending as much as 100 or even 200 baht on fried chicken and a drink is considered ludicrous to the local people here. We produce most of our own food, and there is not enough money to spend. And even if they wanted to try it, they would not be able to afford it. That is the reality. It is usually only those travel

* A convenience store smaller than the original Tesco Lotus.

down to Bangkok or abroad who get to enjoy this luxury, and I am glad that I did. I cannot imagine my life without all of this tasty food. Can you?

Kung had decided that she wanted to buy her father a new television while visiting. Her parents like to follow the news, but their old television no longer works. We drove into Roi-Et town to buy the television, and we decided that we wanted to have some pizza at the only Tesco Lotus in town. Kung explained that because of the lack of presence of foreigners in Roi-Et compared to in other cities in Isan, such as Sisaket, the need for Western fast food restaurants does not appear to be as prominent. Actually, the only Westerners I saw while in Roi-Et were sitting at this pizza restaurant. We also spotted a few others while shopping for a television at Tesco Lotus. While sitting down to dinner at Pizza Company*, our male driver, who is originally from Sisaket, ordered a rice dish, claiming that he did not like cheese. The rest of the table ate pizza with a seafood and cheese topping. None of us ate more than two slices, and Kai, who had never before eaten pizza, seemed more concerned about how to eat the pizza as opposed to if she actually liked it. She did say that she enjoyed the taste, but did only eat one slice. And even if she did not like it, I am pretty certain she would never have told me the truth.

Bell, the girl Kung cares for in Bangkok, and who is well traveled and used to all sorts of Western foods, was more concerned with the fat content than the taste. She refused to eat more than two bites of pizza and seemed content with her sugar free iced coffee and plain water. Kung told me in detail about Bell's eating disorder, and that it being a result of her moving to Australia where people, according to Kung, tend to be more obsessed about weight and appearances. We did bring some leftover pizza back to Kung's parents, but they were not the least interested.

* A Thai restaurant chain focusing on affordable American-Italian cuisine.

3.2.7 Kung's Eating Habits in Bangkok

As Kung is still single, she hardly ever cooks when she is in Bangkok. She lives in an area of Bangkok that is well known for its extensive array of food carts, cafés and restaurants, and so the need to cook is understandably limited. They also have a live-in-chef who cooks most of their meals, and who also cooks for Kung. She is in addition very fond of ramen noodles, but says that she tries to limit her intake of this 'MSG bomb' to only once or twice a week. Her boss and her boss' family often invites her out to eat, and having joined them for countless restaurants visits over the last 14 years, have made her feel more than comfortable when it comes to frequenting a variety of eating establishments. She says that she enjoys Western fast food, especially pizza, but that she does not eat it very often because of the high fat content,

I have gained so much weight recently. It is only because my boss invites me out to eat. We usually go to Japanese chain restaurants, like Fuji, but sometimes we will go for pizza or KFC. Bell and her sister love KFC and McDonald's. Most of the time they order, and we will wait for the delivery man to come to our house. I still do not eat too much though, I do not want to appear greedy. I am also just the staff, and I have to look after the kids.

Kung plans on moving to Australia where Bell studies, but she has yet to apply for a visa or set a date for her departure. She says that she hopes to one day start a family, but that it is a little difficult because Bell and her sister wants her to stay with them as a live-in nanny. I ended up traveling back from Roi-Et with Bell, while Kung stayed on in Roi-Et with her parents. She had been asked to teach English at her local school for a couple of days, and stayed on for this reason. She asked me not to share any pictures of her family or her house with our mutual friends, but I did not receive any explanation as to why she wanted to keep these pictures hidden.

3.3 Case Study 3 - Kai, Buriram

3.3.1 Historical Background

Kai is a 41-year-old female from the district of Kra-Sang in the province of Buriram. Buriram is one of the northeastern provinces of Thailand, and is located approximately 400 kilometers from the capital city of Bangkok. It is divided into 24 districts, and has a geographic area of over 10,000 square kilometers. The province borders Khon Kaen and Maha Sarakham to the north, Surin to the east, Nakhon Ratchasima to the west and Sa Kaew to the south. To the southeast it borders Meanchey of Cambodia, and the present day Buriram was indisputably subdued to the Khmer Empire as ruins from that period are still present in the area. Because of the province's close proximity and past history with Cambodia, a large part of the population speaks Northern Khmer in everyday life, which also includes Kai and her family.

3.3.2 Kai's Family Relations

Kai is the oldest of four children. She grew up with two younger sisters, Ben and Nung, aged 37 and 36, respectively. She has one younger brother, aged 39, a father and a mother. Nung is the biological daughter of Kai's uncle, but was 'informally adopted' by Kai's parents when she was still a baby. The brother and Nung still live in Kra-Sang, in close proximity to their parents' house. Kai and Ben moved to Bangkok after both completing M3.* While Kai is single and has no children of her own, she is the aunt of seven. Nung is married and is the mother of four, while Ben is also married with three young children. Ben's children all reside with Ben's parents in Kra-Sang, while Ben and her husband are working in Bangkok as a maid and a driver, respectively. It is considered rather common for grandparents to look after their grandchildren in Isan while the

* M3 is the Thai equivalent to 9th grade.

children are living and working in the capital or in another larger city. A reason for this is that the parents often have very hectic work schedules, and do not have the time or the energy to look after their own children.

As in the case of Ben, she works as a maid and lives with her boss during the week, which leaves her with a salary of approximately 10,000 baht a month. Her husband works as a personal driver for a local family in Bangkok, and they only get to see each other on the weekends when they are not working. Because their children live in Kra-Sang with Ben's parents, she is only able to see them on major holidays, such as during the Songkran festival* and during the New Year holiday. Both Ben and her husband work hard to cover the costs Ben's parents have to endure raising her three children, which she estimates at about 5,000 baht per month.

Kai's parents were originally rice farmers, and her father also worked in construction. Now they both have reached an age where they no longer have the energy nor the health to do any sort of manual labor, and are for that reason financially dependent on their children. They do get a small pension each from the government*, but it is far from being sufficient to cover their cost of living. Kai's father suffered a freak accident while working on a construction site about eight years ago, which rendered him completely unable to work. Today he wears diapers and spends most of his time in bed while watching sports and various soap operas in the living room. Kai's mother suffers from congenital disease as well as kidney disease, and is therefore dependent on a variety of medications and a constricted diet.

Because Ben does not have the resources required to support her parents as well as her children financially, Kai is the sole supporter of their parents. She was at one point engaged to a man her parents suggested that she should marry, but she broke off the engagement when she realized that he did not act in a respectable manner toward her parents. This meant that she had to pay back the full dowry in addition to twenty-five percent of the sum, and has since then decided that if she is ever to get married, it will be to someone who is financially stable and who shows a deep respect for her parents.

* Songkran is the traditional Thai New Year festival and a public holiday. It falls on the 13th, 14th, and 15th of April every year.

* The monthly pension amounts to about 500 baht or 16 USD per person.

Although Kai currently has a decent salary of about fifteen thousand bath a month working as a maid for a British man in Bangkok, she claims that if she were lucky enough to meet a foreigner who would be willing to marry her and support her parents, life would be significantly easier. The majority of what would be considered the nicer houses in the district of Kra-Sang, belong to foreigners. Kai says that she one day would like to own such a house. She revealed,

Any girl who marries a foreigner is so lucky. They get to live in nice houses and they never have to worry about anything. All they have to do is cook and look after their children. I make good Western food, so I think I would be an excellent wife. My current boss loves my Mexican food, and he especially loves my salsa. I also bake cookies, which foreigners love. I must tell you that one foreigner has courted me, but because he was not willing to help support my family financially, I decided to turn down his offer to marry. Now I am just waiting to meet the right one. I know I am old, but I am in no hurry to be getting married.

3.3.3 Traveling to Kra-sang, Buriram

Kai's sister, Ben, has been my student for the past two years in Bangkok, and she was the one who invited me to spend the New Year holiday with Kai and the rest of her family in Buriram. She booked our train tickets in advance, but because it was the New Year holiday and the train was almost fully booked, we had to settle on third class tickets. This meant no air-conditioning, limited space and tiny plastic seats. The seven hour long train ride on the 29th of December of 2011 was grueling, but was indisputably made more tolerable by the dozens of individuals who would, at each train station, jump of an off the train selling food items to passengers from woven baskets, such as fried chicken, sticky rice and dumplings. Iced-coffee, liquor, painkillers and cigarettes were also available for sale. There were not enough seats on the train for everyone, and several passengers, both

adults and children alike, were sitting in the aisle of the train as well as standing up while hanging on to the bars attached to the ceiling.

Upon our arrival in Kra-Sang, Ben and I were greeted by Kai and her parents. Kai and her siblings grew up in the house in which her parents still live. It is situated in the area of Baan Lamduan, which got its name from the large amounts of Lamduan flowers found around the local temple, not far from their house. As soon as I entered the house, Kai started apologizing for the dust and the spider webs covering the ceiling. She exclaimed,

The house is so dusty because it is situated just next to the main road. There used to be very little traffic on this road, but that is not the case anymore. I spend all my time dusting, but I can never get rid of it all. I want to set up gates to keep the dust out, but we just cannot afford it right now, and we certainly cannot afford to buy a new house further from the road. I miss the good old days when cleaning the house was easy.

3.3.4 Housing and the Local Cuisine

I was personally surprised to find that both the spacious kitchen and the bathroom were located indoor, while only the washing up station was situated outside the house, just behind the kitchen. The bathroom was traditional-Isan style in that it had the squat toilet and you would shower by using a small bucket or a ladle to douse yourself with cold water. But compared to the other Isan toilets I had seen previously, this was far the cleanest space. Kai mentioned that she was saving up money to buy a proper, Western toilet. Her parents are old, and the squat toilets were becoming more and more inconvenient. They even had a brand new washing machine set up, which I until then had not seen in an Isan household. Because, at any given time, there were at least five people living in the house, including three children, the washing machine was running non-stop. Kai insisted that if I had any laundry, I was more than welcome to use their washing

machine. She also gave me two sets of clean towels to use, which is a gesture I until then I had not experienced in an Isan household. The house consisted of two floors. The top floor, also known as the ‘sleeping area,’ was built approximately thirty years ago and was made entirely out of wood. The ground floor was built at a later date and was made of cement. Kai exclaimed that she would like to buy all the electronic equipment often found in a Western household for her parents’ house, and that she is currently saving up, buying one item at a time.

The cuisine in Buriram share many similarities to that of the Cambodian cuisine. Although sticky rice is widely used in the making of various snacks and kanom*, the locals consume mainly jasmine rice as opposed to sticky rice for their main meals. The food is not as spicy as perhaps found in other regions of Isan, and food options that are commonly found in Bangkok, such as tom yam soup* and green curry, are also staple foods in Buriram. I could not help notice that somtam pla-ra*, which is hugely popular throughout Isan and was sold in plenty at the local market, giving off a rather unpleasant scent, seemed not to be part of the diet in Kai’s household. The reason being that Kai’s mother could not consume pla-ra due to health problems, but that they would on occasion eat som tam, without the addition of pla-ra or fermented fish. As there would be no special dishes only made for the parents, the entire family would all eat the same food, which would always be tailored to meet the parents’ diet restrictions. There would be very little salt added to the food, and because the father would not eat chicken, there would never be any dishes, apart from fried chicken for the children, which contained chicken. Fresh sadao leaves* are typically served as a side dish with every meal and are often found in combination with fish sauce.

Growing up, Kai’s family had several coconut trees around their house, so coconut milk and coconut cream were ingredients often incorporated into dishes served at home. Now that they no longer have the trees, they do not eat nearly as many coconut-

* The Thai word for sweets or candy.

* A soup characterized by its distinct hot and sour flavors.

* A spicy salad of Laos origin usually made from shredded unripened papaya, with pla-ra or fermented anchovies.

* Edible leaves of natural insecticide Neem trees. They have a bitter-sweet taste, and are rich in calcium and fiber.

infused dishes. In contrast to many households across Isan, which tend to be more self-sufficient, the food served in Kai's parents' house does not change dramatically from season to season. Most of what they eat is purchased from outside, and apart from only being able to buy certain fruits depending on the season, their eating habits stay mostly the same throughout the year.

While other dishes tend to vary according to region, fried chicken is a dish that is popular in Buriram, and can be found throughout Isan as well as the rest of Thailand. I was also told that the children of the household responded well to fried macaroni, which would be prepared with a variety of different vegetables. Ben elaborated on the reason as to why macaroni was always the table,

It was not until Kai moved to Bangkok and started working with foreigners that she became aware of how fond children are of macaroni and spaghetti, in general. Since then, she always makes macaroni for the children when she is visiting her parents. She will also prepare this dish if they come to visit her in Bangkok.

I did not notice the children drinking nearly as much soda as the children I had previously observed in other regions of Isan. However, they all had a sweet tooth, and the treats I bought them were devoured within minutes. Their parents did not seem to mind their children eating treats on a weekday, and it appeared that the restraints they put on their children as to what they could and could not eat, had more to do with the cost of the various items as opposed to the nutritional value. Kai's mother would frequently complain about her grandchildren,

James (Ben's son) always asks for money to buy sweets. Every day he asks for 5 or 10 baht. I do not understand why he is not satisfied with just eating fruit; there is always fruit on the table. Sometimes he also asks for money to play on the

computer across the street. I am so glad that there is no KFC in the area. It would ruin us.

While observing the children eating breakfast one morning, Ben was so kind as to tell me a little about what her and her siblings' eating habits were like growing up. She recalled,

My mother used to boil two eggs, cut each one in half, add a bowl of rice, and that would be enough to feed all four children. If we had any sort of meat, she would add salt and seasoning to it in hopes of it satisfying our hunger faster. Today the children eat what they like, and I am glad we do not have the same monetary restraints.

Just like every household in Isan, Kai's family eats each meal with their hands, as opposed to eating with a spoon and a fork. Kai, who was fully aware of the fact that this is not considered proper dining etiquette by Western standards, would apologize for eating with her hands prior to the start of each meal. She said,

I'm sorry for eating with my hands, but the food does not taste as good if I use cutlery. I usually eat with a spoon and a fork when I am in Bangkok, but it is different here. We all eat with our hands, and it is part of the tradition. I know it is not a pretty sight. It is just that when you are at home with your family, there is no other way to eat. This is the right way for us, the only way.

Within walking distance of the house in Kra-Sang, there was a noodle shop with a couple of tables and a small outdoor café serving a variety of local dishes, including mee yam, which is the dish Kra-Sang is famous for. I was told that the owner of the café used

to be married to a well off German man, and that when they decided to end the marriage, she seized the opportunity to move back home and used the money she had saved up over the years to start her own café. Kai spoke in admiration of the owner, and became flustered when we visited the café and the owner insisted that our meal was on the house.

Apart from a few desserts, Kai made every dish that was eaten at the house from scratch. The majority of the groceries were purchased at the local fresh market, which, was located just a few hundred meters away from the house. It was open every afternoon, and sold everything from food to toys to clothes. Kai would visit the market every few days, and if she happened to be in Buriram city, she would buy as many items as possible from the local Tesco Lotus^{*} there. It did not take long before I came to the realization that the family did not waste any food, and what had not been eaten the night before, would be served the following morning. For instance, if we had striped snakehead fish or catfish and tom yam soup for dinner, it was inevitable that those items would be on the table the following morning. New items would be added to distinguish it from the previous meal. Kai's mother liked to snack on small grilled fish (pla siaw), and there would always be grilled chicken on the table for the children.

Kai and her family seemingly ate every meal at their house, and apart from my one visit to the local café with Kai, did not observe any of the other family members eating out. It was, however, rare to observe the entire family sitting down to a meal together as a family. The parents tended to eat much earlier than everyone else, especially the father, and I often found myself alone at the table with my food and drink. And even if they, on a rare occasion, decided to eat together as a family, there would always be someone looking after the children while the others ate, hence making it impossible for everyone to eat together. Kai's sister, who lives in the house next door, consumes many of her meals at Kai's parents house, and she often makes food in her own kitchen that she brings over.

* A hypermarket chain, which stocks groceries as well as a selection of non-food products, such a clothes and school supplies.

3.3.5 Western Fast Food in Buriram

There were no Western fast food restaurants in Kra-Sang or in the neighboring districts, and the nearest ones were in Buriram town and in the neighboring province of Surin. Both locations were about an hour or so away by car, but the family preferred to travel to Surin over Buriram due to the excitement factor of crossing the provincial border. However, they would only make the journey about once a year because of the high costs of traveling. All three of Ben's children have visited Surin and Bangkok on several occasions, and they even claim to be experts on Western fast food. They selected KFC as their favorite restaurant because of the tasty chicken, while pizza restaurants were furthest down on the list because of the cheese. Kai explained,

It is mostly high school and university students living in the city, who eat pizza. Our kids (referring to her nieces and nephews,) do not like the cheese, which always seems to be added to it. I have to admit that our kids have never been to the cinema. I have taken the kids and walked past the cinema, but we have never actually stepped inside. They will get their chance when they grow up, just as they will get their chance to eat all the fast food they can dream of.

Kai later told me that she would often take the wrapping from KFC home with her, put homemade fried chicken and french fries in them, and then present it to the children as KFC. Kai, being the oldest daughter of the household, would be responsible for doing the grocery shopping and for preparing the meals at the house when visiting her parents. She could be found working in the kitchen from early morning to late evening, often preparing dishes for the next day. She explained what happens when Isan girls move to Bangkok and then returns to Isan for a visit,

Although most girls are taught how to make local Isan style items growing up, when they move to Bangkok they grow accustomed to eating the dishes popular

there. So when they then return to Isan and have to make food for their parents, they often end up making the foods that are popular in the capital. I'm guilty of this, but luckily my parents always seem to like what I make for them.

3.3.6 Kai's Personal Relationship With Western Food

While Kai might be considered overweight by Thai standards, she claims that she does not eat much, and that it is in fact 'her happiness that is responsible for her womanly figure.' I constantly noticed her sipping on sugary drinks and snacking on a variety of pastry goods, often filled with pandan leaves* and shredded coconut. Although there are no food she considers as being 'not good enough for her' since moving to the capital, she has definitely acquired rather specific tastes with regards to luxury goods* over the years, and she talks extensively about her love for coffee and cheese. Usually, when she visits her parents, she brings these items with her for herself and her family to enjoy, but on this occasion, she had apparently forgotten everything at home. I was therefore served regular Birdy 3-1 coffee* every morning with instant creamer added, which according to Kai,

... is nothing like the good coffee we get in Bangkok. My brother prefers coffee Arabica, but I really like Doi Tung* coffee. Coffee Arabica is much better than Robusta coffee, but Toi Tung has the best taste. I like treating myself to nice coffee and nice soap. I don't even like the condensed milk, which is so popular to add to coffee drinks here in Thailand. It just does not taste as good. But I have to admit that it were not for my late boss, I probably would not be so fussy about coffee. He taught me everything I know about the Western way of eating. He had a huge house. I cannot even remember the number of rooms, there were too

* Leaves which are used in Southeast Asian cooking to add a distinct aroma to various dishes, such as desserts.

* Products and services that are not considered essential and are associated with affluence.

* Instant Robusta coffee with cream and sugar added. Sold in individual sachets.

* Coffee harvested from the hills of Doi Tung in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

many. He bought me my own computer and paid for my non-formal education. I wonder what things would have been like if I never met him.

When Kai first moved to Bangkok and met her then boss, she would often accompany him and others from work to fast food venues and nicer Thai restaurants. She would observe her boss as he ordered the food, and then she would copy his behavior. After having visited various fast food outlets numerous times over the years, Kai does not feel the least intimidated to visit these venues on her own. In fact, she says she feels more at home and prefers more exclusive restaurants, and lists places such as Santa Fe^{*} and Sizzler^{*} where there is table service and the food is slightly more expensive.

I really like the steaks at Santa Fe. Unfortunately my body cannot tolerate the excessive amounts of MSG added to the steaks, so I prefer to cook steaks at home now. I usually buy the steaks from Villa Market.^{*} Their steaks are very tasty. I do not mind paying a little extra for high quality steaks, although I only eat steak on very special occasions and sometimes on the weekends if I have just gotten my paycheck or if I have good friends coming to visit. I like treating my friends to good, homemade meals. My friends might bring some food from outside, such as papaya salad and sticky rice, to eat with the steaks.

Kai spends the majority of her time at work, and therefore consumes the majority of her meals at work. Despite her efforts to cook every meal from scratch, she often resorts to buying her food from street carts. There are several reasonably priced food

^{*} An American chain restaurant found throughout Bangkok, serving steaks at reasonable prices.

^{*} Another reasonably priced American chain restaurant serving American-style-food with an all-you-can-eat salad bar.

^{*} One of Bangkok's up-scale supermarkets.

vendors in the area where she works, therefore convenience triumphs home-cooking. She mentions that she is aware of the large amounts of additives added to the food, but says,

There is nothing I would rather want than to prepare all my meals from scratch, but I spend most of my time at work, and buying the food from street carts and market stalls are just all too convenient and it is very cheap. I try to eat as much fruit as possible, and is a decent alternative when I am feeling peckish. On a rare occasion, my boss will ask me to join him for dinner, which usually consists of eating Mexican food. I feel comfortable eating with my boss, but I often feel apprehensive accepting the invitation to join him. With regards to my late boss, we would dine together all the time, and it was always a pleasure.

Kai works five days a week, and spends the remaining two days making jewelry and baking cookies. She is constantly coming up with ways to increase her monthly income, and in addition to her yearly bonus and overtime compensation, hopes that she one day can purchase a car. But when her family asks her to help out financially, beyond what would be considered her responsibility, she never declines. She even covered the costs of Ben's wedding ceremony, which according to Ben, was a rather elaborate affair. Her words of farewell were that the next time I visit Kra-Sang, she will drive me up there in her own private car.

3.4 Case 4 - Araya, Yasothorn

3.4.1 Historical Background

Araya is a 34-year-old woman from the province of Yasothorn. Yasothorn is a fairly small province on the Chi River in the lower northeastern region of Thailand, approximately 530 kilometers from Bangkok. Neighboring provinces are Mukdahan to

the north, Roi-Et to the west, Sisaket to the south and Amnat Charoen to the east. The province was created in 1972, when it was split off from the province of Ubon Ratchatani. Yasothorn has an area of just over 4000 square kilometers, which makes it one of the smaller provinces in Thailand. It is divided into nine districts, and has a population of over 560,000 people (year 2000.) Primary occupations in Yasothorn are rice farming, crop farming and orchard farming, with rice farming the most common. The province is first and foremost famous for growing high-quality jasmine rice, and the majority of the people living in Yasothorn speak a dialect of Laotian, which includes Araya and her family.

3.4.2 Araya's Family Relations

Araya is the middle child of three siblings. Her father passed away years ago, but her mother still lives in same house that Araya and her siblings grew up in. Araya has an older brother, Anon, and a younger brother, Bang, who both reside on the same property as Araya's mother in Yasothorn. While Anon lives alone in what might be considered a shed just by the entrance to the residence, Bang lives in the same house as their mother. Bang is a single father of a 9-year-old boy, Garfield, and Anon has two sons of his own. Bang was once married to a Thai woman and he moved down to the central province of Samut Prakan* to live with her. When the wife decided to end the marriage several years ago, she left Garfield with the husband, and Bang made the decision to move back to Yasothorn to stay with his mother and to assist her in the rice fields. Garfield has not seen his mother since the divorce, but receives motherly love from both Araya and Araya's mother. Anon sustained a serious head injury after having been involved in a motorcycle accident about eight years ago, which caused extensive neuromotor problems. He is no longer able to work. Araya told me about his life prior to the accident,

* The province borders Bangkok to the north and west, as well as Chachoengsao to the east.

My older brother used to be married to a Thai woman. They were living together here in Yasothorn, and they had two sons together. Back then he was a farmer like my mother and everyone else in the area, and was able to support his family. After the accident, she left him. Just like that. Apparently she could not be bothered sticking around. When she left him, she took their two sons with her. She has since re-married, and her and her new husband are actually just living up the road from here. She has a son with her new husband, and it is only after that child was born that my brother's two sons are more interested in spending time with my brother. I do not think they get much attention from their mother anymore.

Today Anon receives 500 baht* per month in disabilities from the government, which he spends exclusively on alcohol. Araya's mother, who still works in the rice fields, but has reached the age of 60, also receives 500 baht per month in the form of a pension.

3.4.3 Araya's Education and Employment History

Araya, who is currently single and without children, moved to Bangkok from Yasothorn after having finished M3. Upon her arrival, she immediately started working in a sweatshop. However, because of the excruciating working and living conditions they provided for her, she soon decided to move back to Yasothorn while searching for a better job. She explained,

It was horrible. We slept at the factory and ate all our meals there. We only paid for electricity and water, but there was very little space and the pay was below minimum wage. Although I did not realize that the pay was that far below

* Equivalent of 16 USD a month.

minimum wage until much later. None of the girls I worked with stayed at the factory. As far as I know, they all moved back with their families.

Araya did not have any good connections in and around Bangkok at the time, but soon found a job working for an electronics company in Nakhon Pathom, which is a small neighboring province to Bangkok. Araya has stayed with this company making electronic units, and receives a salary of 300 baht per day.* In addition, she receives yearly bonuses and special overtime compensation. She works at least 12 hours a day, five to six days a week depending on demand. She rents a room with a fan for 1,200 baht* a month, and because her energy usage seldom exceeds 90 units, she is not charged for electricity as part of a government initiative to encourage energy conservation. She tries to spend as little money on herself as possible, but did get braces on her teeth two years ago. The total cost was approximately 40,000 baht and she pays the dentist back in installments of 2000 baht a month.

Araya completed M6 in Bangkok by taking evening and weekend classes, but has never considered the option of furthering her education. She has also no plans of leaving her current job, and says that the bonus she receives at the end of the year is more than enough to ever want to leave her job. While Araya's mother and Bang make a decent living from selling rice, they are dependent on Araya's salary to support them. Because Araya is the only sibling who is working in another field than farming, she is undoubtedly the main breadwinner of the family. She sends a substantial part of her salary home to her mother every month, which the mother then uses to cover various costs. Without Araya's financial support, they would not have been able to build their new house. Araya also helps pay for Garfield's education, and makes sure he has enough clothes to stay warm during the cold winter months. She also gives her older brother some money for alcohol when she visits. Her hectic work schedule prevents her from traveling home as often as she would like, but she makes the trip about once or twice a year, mainly during public holidays.

* Daily minimum wage in Nakhon Pathom.

* Approximately 39 USD.

3.4.4 Araya's Daily Food Consumption in Bangkok

Araya takes most of her meals in the cafeteria at work because of the low cost and convenience. She said,

I never cook at home. I do not have the equipment needed. I do not even have a regular rice cooker or a fridge. I live alone, so I do not have anyone else to cook for. I usually return home from work so late that I have to go straight to bed, and so I always make sure I have my last meal of the day in the cafeteria at work. I am at work by 7am every morning, and by 7.30am I have finished my breakfast in the cafeteria. Nothing costs more than 15 baht, and although they do not have jasmine rice, the price is just too good to care what kind of rice they serve. The rice soup tastes like cardboard, but I eat it anyway because it is cheap and fast. It definitely saves me time.

Araya tends to start her day off with rice soup or noodles. For lunch she prefers papaya salad with fermented fish and sticky rice. If she finishes work early, she usually buys some fried chicken or pork with sticky rice from the market to eat at home. Otherwise she will eat fried chicken in the cafeteria at work. On her days off, she eats at outdoor markets or along the street. She thinks food courts, which tend to be slightly more expensive than street food, are much better than any restaurant, and considers a trip to a food court a splurge in itself. She tries to spend as little money as possible, and only spends about 100 Baht a day on food. I also asked Araya if she ever ate Western fast food, and this is how she replied,

I can eat anything, but KFC or McDonald's is just too oily. I only go when my nephew or other children are visiting. It is too expensive and I do not like it, so I only go when I have to or when someone else is paying. That sounds bad, but it is true. Sometimes my friends will go, and of course I have to join them. I do not even drink coffee, and I only buy ice-cream from the street vendors. Until

recently, I had never stepped foot into an ice-cream parlour, and I would never go into, say, Starbucks. It is just not my scene., and I feel uncomfortable. I do have friends who love Western fast food though, especially KFC and sometimes Chester Grill. I do not understand what all the hype is about.

3.4.5 Visiting Yasothorn

Araya has been my student since late 2008, and she invited me to visit her family on King Bhumibol's birthday* of 2011, which is a public holiday in Thailand. It also happened to be at the end of the rice-harvesting season, and Araya wanted to travel home to help out her mother and her brother in the rice fields. Because the King's birthday fell on a Monday, Araya was able to take the entire weekend off, and we left late Friday night by bus from one of the main bus stations in Bangkok. Two of my other students, Porn, who works for the same company as Araya, and Noi, who works in a beauty clinic, came with us. They are from the provinces of Uttaradit in the north and Ubon in the northeast, respectively. Although Porn and Araya work at the same factory, Porn works in the office while Araya is on the production line. Porn, therefore, has a higher salary than Araya, but works the same amount of hours. They wake up before 5am and they are both clocked in at work at 7am. Araya talks about how little sleep she gets,

With the overtime, sometimes I do not get home until 10pm. I try to get to bed by midnight, but that does not always work. Sometimes I only get three or four hours of sleep. I have two alarm clocks, and I have to set both to be able to wake up in the morning. I am so incredibly tired when I wake up, but you could say that I'm used to it. At least I make sure I eat my meals at work, so I do not have to start cooking when I get home.

* The King's birthday is on the 5th of December. This day is also Father's Day.

We arrived in Yasothorn early Saturday morning, and as we were walking over to Araya's house, we were met by an older lady on a motorcycle selling breakfast items. My students bought some crackers and canned iced coffee from her, and devoured the coffee before the lady was able to make her escape. When we arrived at the house, we were greeted by one of Araya's older brothers and Araya's nephew, Garfield, who was enjoying a day off from school. It was a rather cold morning, and we were all wearing jackets and socks. The first thing that struck me upon our arrival was how quiet the house was. There were chickens running around, but there were barely any people. After having already visited so many different homes in the northeastern region of Thailand, I had grown accustomed to being greeted by a larger group of people, and by people coming running over to see the new guests. But this time it was completely quiet, with only the sound of animals and the wind blowing.

Araya's family has two houses, an old and a new house, which are situated just next to each other on the same property, with no other houses in close proximity. The family's new house is brand new and it is entirely made out of wood. Araya talked proudly about the new house,

We have been saving up for a while to be able to build it, but it was finally time. The old house is not good enough, and we needed something new. It cost approximately 100,000 baht* to build, mainly because of the steep price of the high quality wood used. But so far I like the house. It is simple and new. What more could one want?

Noi, Porn and myself were the first guests able to sleep in the new house, and it was so new that they were installing electricity just as we arrived. It was also the first time for Araya to see the house completed, and she started dusting and cleaning the floor as soon as she got to the house, making sure it would be dust-free and clean by bed time. There was no furniture there, but we were given mattresses, pillows and blankets. The old

* Approximately 3250 USD.

house is where Araya and her siblings grew up. The top floor was made out of wood and the ground floor was made out of concrete cement. The bathroom was situated between the old house and the new house, and Araya had to make several trips during the day to the family's well to make sure that we had enough water. Luckily the well was just behind the old house, and we all helped Araya carrying the buckets of water back to the house. The water from the well was brown, and I must admit that I never felt completely clean after showering with that particular water. Even though they had a kitchen on the ground floor of the old house, they had set up a small cooking station outside, just under the wooden part of the house. The indoor kitchen had been turned into Bang's bedroom, and they would only cook there when the weather did not allow for outdoor cooking.

3.4.6 Local Eating Habits and Visiting the Local Market

And while they did cook some of their daily meals outside, especially the last meal of the day, I was also told that they often purchased their meals from street vendors just up the road from the house because of the lack of people to cook for. Araya explained,

It is always so quiet here. Apart from my older brother, there is seldom anyone around. And my brothers do not know how to cook. Both of them prefer to buy food from up the road anyway, and it is very cheap. Garfield eats at school and my mother often cooks herself something simple when she is at home and gets hungry before watching soap operas on the tiny television upstairs. She does not really eat much. We do not even own that many kitchen utensils, and it is very, very rare that anyone cooks up at fiest in this kitchen. In fact, I cannot remember the last time we had a huge dinner here. It must have been before my father passed away and I was still in school. That is when we used to have large get-togethers. Those were the days.

As soon as we arrived at the house, Porn and Noi, whom had never visited Yasothorn nor had been to Araya's house prior to this, made themselves comfortable in the outdoor kitchen and began cooking immediately. They made mushroom curry, mackerel and an omelet stuffed with vegetables from groceries bought at the local shop. Araya's mother did not have a fridge, and I was told they kept their groceries upstairs in the new house to prevent dogs and other animals from getting to it.

Although the house was fairly quiet before Porn and Noi started cooking, as soon as the food was ready to be served, hungry neighbors (which are also Araya's relatives) seemed to appear from out of nowhere, ready to socialize and to eat. Araya, who claims that she does not know how to make any other food except Isan style items, let Porn and Noi take full control of the cooking. She herself was in charge of doing the dishes behind the house, and refused to let me help. The food was served on the patio under the old house, and sticky rice came in woven bamboo containers. While I was given a separate container to eat sticky rice from, the remaining guests and Araya's family were eating, with their bare hands, from just one single, large container of sticky rice. But everyone were provided with their own spoon to eat with, and it was interesting to observe how Araya's nephew did not seem to know how exactly to eat with a spoon, or at least he had found his own creative way of using it. He would dip the spoon into the food, and with the food on the spoon would take his fingers and pick up the food from the spoon, before putting it into his mouth. Sometimes he would take a few mouthfuls without using the spoon altogether, before returning to the spoon once again.

During my stay in Yasothorn, I was able to observe a few children eating, and none of them knew how to use cutlery. Neither did they seem concerned about washing their hands before a meal either, and when I brought out the hand sanitizer, they looked at me with a confused expression upon their faces. What was important, though, was the cleaning of the feet before being allowed to put them up on the patio while eating.

Araya's mother was at the time of our arrival, out harvesting rice. And because they needed someone to guard the rice fields from intruders at all hours until they were done harvesting the rice, she spent the entire day as well as the entire night in a small hut by the fields. I was told she had enough food with her, and that she had a cooking station

out by the hut. As mentioned, we arrived in the middle of the rice harvesting season, which was one of the reasons why Araya's family's house was very quiet. Garfield would spend most of his days alone at the house, with only the company of Araya's older brother. He, therefore, was very happy to see Araya again and finally have someone to play with. He loved playing cards, and he would insist on playing the same game over and over again, only slightly changing the rules to his favor.

We did eventually meet Araya's mother the following morning, when we were able to sit down for breakfast together on the patio. To prepare for the breakfast on the second day, we went to the local fresh market at 6am to buy food. Araya had arranged for a pick-up truck to drive us to the market, and the driver waited for us while we were shopping. The shoppers and shopkeepers were clearly not used to having a foreigner running around with a camera taking pictures and making notes, and I was certainly the entertainment of the morning. But I tried to ask permission before taking pictures of the different foods, and the owners did not seem to mind. I only saw one other foreigner on a bicycle as we left the market, and someone told me that we was married to a Thai lady the area and lived only a few kilometers from the market. It was a chilly morning, and everyone was wearing scarves, long-sleeved shirts and hats. Most people traveled to the market by bicycle or motorcycle, and I did not see many coming by car.

It was already bustling by the time we got there, and several breakfast foods were already sold out. I bought waffles containing sweet corn, and some sweetened warm soymilk. A cart selling pastries, very similar to the one I encountered in Roi-Et, was parked at the market. There was one cart selling coffee and tea, and the seller would mix instant coffee and tea with hot water. The line to buy soymilk was much longer than the coffee line, and we ended up buying some warm kanom* and soymilk for Araya's mother to enjoy while preparing for another day in the rice fields. Araya also bought some fish and other vegetables to take with us to prepare out by the rice fields while Araya's family were harvesting rice. While I was waiting for Araya and the others to finish their shopping, I had a talk with the driver of the pick-up truck. He said,

*Meaning desserts or snacks. In this case it referred to some pastries.

I use this pick-up truck to sell groceries by driving from house to house. Of course I do not have the same selection that you can get at the market, but it is definitely an option if you do not have the time to shop or if you think the market is too far way.

Most of the people in the area around Araya's mother's house were related to one another. As we drove to the rice fields, relatives, who were also working with Araya's mother in the fields, would jump onboard the pick-up truck. While they were harvesting rice, Noi and Porn would prepare a meal by the hut consisting of papaya salad with fermented fish and sticky rice for the workers, and Araya would help. They would grill the fish on a fire by splitting two pieces of wood in half and placing the fish in between. The men and the women would sit separately while eating their lunch. The men would sit on the patio and the women would sit on the ground behind a wall. Only the men would drink alcohol, and the women would drink Pepsi or water. Noi and Porn also made rat na* for the rest of us after having served all the worlkers. Noi and Porn spent most of their time in Yasothorn cooking, and would always make sure everyone had been fed before we were allowed to leave the house, even if that meant that our driver had to wait. Porn shared some information about her household and way of life,

I grew up in Uttaradit province in the north. My father passed away, but my mother is still alive. She sells food out of her house and her house is a huge mess. She is also a large women suffering from diabetes and other things. She eats sweets all day and does not take any exercise. But she is happy. There are mosquitoes everywhere because we live just by a pond. My room in Bangkok is cleaner, but I spend all my money on clothes, so there is not much space to keep anything else. I pay 1800 Baht per month on rent, but I do not know how much I

* A noodle dish of Thai-Chinese origin. It is made with stir-fried wide rice noodles, a form of meat and vegetables. The dish is then covered in gravy made of stock and tapioca starch or cornstarch.

spend on clothes. To tell you the truth, I do not want to think about it. But at least I save a bunch on food as I eat the majority of my meals in the cafeteria at work. The food is cheap there. And although I love cooking, I am only able to cook when I go home or visit friends.

3.4.7 Eating Out

While staying with Araya's family in Yasothorn, we only had one meal at a restaurant. When I asked if there was a Western fast food restaurant in the area, Araya told me that the closest was in the neighboring province of Mukdahan or Roi Et. It was after we had visited two temples, one Burmese style temple and a forest temple, that we stopped at an outdoor restaurant. Araya was not familiar with any eating establishments in the area, and so we just randomly chose one that looked fairly nice. Some of Araya's relatives had come with us, sitting on the back of the pick up truck, and they all decided that they were hungry and wanted to join us for a meal.

We ordered a variety of dishes such as papaya salad, sticky rice, fried chicken, crab and a local version of Tom Yam soup. I also ordered fried rice, which I got last because it is a dish that costumers only seldom order. The children got Pepsi, which they seemed to love. The men ordered a local whiskey, which came in a ceramic container, and which they drank with a straw. It was passed around from male to male while waiting for the food. Everyone seemed to eat his or her meal extremely fast. We were not in a hurry, and especially the children, were putting spoons of food into their mouths before they had even finished chewing the last mouthful. One of these children were rather large, and when I asked someone why they all ate so fast, the adults quickly made a point about this particular girl's weight, drawing a connection between her large food consumption and her weight. They did not seem concerned, in the least, talking about her weight and making funny remarks at the table while she listening.

There was cutlery, but all the guests used their fingers to pick out the sticky rice from the containers. We ended up leaving Araya's house a day before we were

supposed due because of changes in her work schedules. Her mother gave us a pillow each to take back to Bangkok.

3.5 Tao, Roi-Et

3.5.1 How Tao Came To Be My Student

Tao is a 32-year-old woman from the district of Chaturaphak Phiman in Roi Et province. Chaturaphak Phiman is located just to the north of Kaset Wisai district where my other case study, Kung is originally from, and they grew up only a few kilometers from each other. Despite growing up in such close proximity of each other, they did not have the opportunity to meet until Tao came to work for the same family as Kung was working for in Bangkok. But while Kung stayed on, and has remained with the family to this day, Tao left her job after merely one year due to changes in the family structure where she was working. Even though Tao left her job, she has kept in touch with Kung, and they meet as often as they have the chance to. Approximately eight months ago, when I was forced to move my students to a new location, and was able to take on more students, Kung brought Tao with her to study with me, and she has remained as my student. She currently in the process of applying for a job to work for the same family that Mon is working for, but has yet to receive an offer.

3.5.2 Chaturaphak Phiman

Chaturaphak Phiman is similar to the district of Kaset Wisai in the sense that until just recently, the residents first and foremost partook in non-monetary trade. Today, as in Kaset Wisai, money plays a much more significant role, and getting by, solely, on non-monetary trade is considered almost impossible. As Tao explained,

We were not always this dependent on money. Growing up, my mother would exchange goods with neighbors. Each household would be known for producing one or more specific items, and when people wanted that item, they would go to that house with items they had to offer in return. It is not like that anymore. My siblings and myself have to work hard to support our parents. We all help out in our own way. My mother still has not completely succumbed to the monetary world and tries to exchange good with others, but she is struggling doing so.

3.5.3 Tao's Family Relations

Tao is the middle child of five siblings. Her parents still live in the house where Tao and her siblings grew up, and they are now both in their 60s. This means that they both get a monthly pension of 600 baht each from the government. Tao's mother has given birth to as many as seven children, but two passed away at an early age. Tao's mother's firstborn and only son, passed away at the age of five. At that time, they thought he just had a common cold, and only realized it was much more serious until it was too late. Tao's mother also had a daughter who passed away before Tao was born.

Following the death of her firstborn, Tao's mother so obsessively wanted another son, but to her 'disappointment' as Tao puts it, she ended up with five daughters. Two of her daughters still live in Chaturaphak Phiman. The youngest daughter, who is 32 years of age, has a family of her own, and lives with her husband and children in a separate house to their parents. The oldest daughter, who is 37, is still single and lives in the same house as their parents. She sleeps in the same bedroom as the mother, on the second floor of the house. The father sleeps downstairs, alone. Tao and her youngest sister currently reside in Bangkok and Phuket, respectively.

Tao's parents were originally rice farmers. Tao's father, is according to Tao, an alcoholic and a gambler, and has not provided for his family for the last two decades. Tao tells me the story of how her parents got married and how their life together turned out,

My mother had a boyfriend whom she wanted to marry. He was not considered 'good enough' by her family, and so they recommend the man who became her husband and my father. He was known as good man back then, and at the beginning of their marriage everything was seemingly perfect. Everyone admired them and everyone were envious of their perfect relationship. But it did not take that many years for things to fall apart and for my mother to lose her happiness. These days my dad stays home drinking, gambling and having different women around. My mother just smiles all day long. That is all she can do. He does not care about anyone but himself. He gets so angry when he drinks, and will set my son's clothes on fire and throw food around the house when he is extremely drunk, which is most of the time.

Because of Tao's irresponsible father, a lot of the work that needed to be done around the house and in the fields when Tao and her siblings were growing up, ended up on their shoulders. They had to help their mother in every way possible. They had to work before and after school, either in the kitchen or in the rice fields. During holidays, they would have to work full time looking after the buffalos, working in the rice fields or hunting for food. Their mother is today sick, but she still tries to hunt for food, and often picks up bugs and beetles she finds to make beetle paste with. Tao says that she can eat everything, and that she has yet to come across a food that she would not be able to stomach. Tao is not apprehensive about telling me how poor her family is, and that they have no other option than to live from hand to mouth and eat anything that will keep them going. Her two sisters who are still living in Chaturaphak Phiman with their parents, have a mushroom farm, and her oldest sister also has a food stall at the local temple where she works daily selling various dishes with rice. This pays some of the bills, but certainly not all.

Although Tao's father has been an alcoholic for as long as she can remember, he did have a period where he stopped drinking, and Tao's siblings seized the opportunity to show him what he was missing out on and what they could have if he did not waste such a large amount of money on alcohol. Tao explains,

The house my parents are living in is falling apart. We are scared it is going to collapse any moment, but we do not have the finances to buy a new house. When my father was not drinking, we started toying with the idea of getting a loan from the bank to buy a new house. My siblings really wanted a Thai style house, and they took my father to look at some options. At that time, my father was on methadone, but as soon as we did not have the money to fill up his prescription, he started drinking again. And so we are still hoping to buy a new house. Living in a house that is about to literally crack is a dangerous thing, especially since my son is there. I would not want anything to happen to him. He is such a good little boy.

3.5.4 Tao's past relationship

Tao was in a long-term relationship with a man from the province of Korat* a few years ago, and that relationship yielded one son. But as she only became aware of the pregnancy after having split up with her then boyfriend, the father of the baby does not have any contact with either Tao or their son. Tao talks about their failed relationship,

He did not care about me. He had two other women in his life, and I did not know about them until after we broke up. Just like my father, he spent all his money on gambling and alcohol. He does not try to contact me or our son, and he has never offered to help out financially. I lost so much weight when we were together. Food just did not taste good. I used to weigh 60 kilos, and I went down to about 50 kilos over the course of our relationship. At least my mother can now have a boy to care for.

* An Isan province also known as Nakhon Ratchasima.

Tao's son lives with Tao's parents, and Tao only gets to see him once or twice a year when she visits. When she is between jobs, she might stay with her son for a month or even longer, but it has been a while since she has had the opportunity to do so. Tao currently lives alone in Bangkok and is working two jobs as a nanny for two different families, so she does not have the resources to look after her son on her own. But she says that her mother loves her son dearly, and that this is where he needs to be at this point in his life.

3.5.5 Training and Employment

Tao initially worked as a waitress in Roi-Et during the day while working towards receiving the equivalent of her High School diploma. She then packed her bags and moved down to Bangkok and worked as housekeeper for a short while, which included her one-year employment with the family that Poon currently works for. Following her short stint as a housekeeper, Tao made the decision to take a three-month long course in babysitting/childcare in the area of On Nut in Bangkok. She talks about her experiences at the school,

It was almost like studying at university, or at least what I imagine university to be like. We were split into classes, and then we would 'graduate' at the end, receiving a diploma and having a small gathering with food and music. It was pretty special. We all lived at the school. We took all of our meals there, and it was all included in the price. I think I paid it cost a total of 15,000 baht, but they only charged us after we had 'graduated.' They actually got in touch with my employer, and she paid off the school in installments. I was lucky that I found a job as soon I finished the course.

As soon as Tao's boss had paid back the course fee, Tao started working in a shopping centre selling t-shirts. She did that for three months before switching to factory

work. It was during this time that she met her Thai boyfriend, and when she realized that she was pregnant she moved back home with her family in Roi Et, and started working in a factory producing undergarments. She would walk several kilometers to and from work until she was about seven months pregnant. After she had her son, she stayed at home with her family for a year, without a regular income. She then had to leave her son with her parents and seek employment elsewhere. She found a job at a factory in the province of Korat, producing electronic equipment. After working there for a few months, she moved south to be closer to her younger sister in Phuket. She first worked as a saleswoman in Krabi before moving to Phuket and working as a waitress. Tao talks about living in Phuket,

I had a friend who lived in Phuket back then, and so of course I moved in with her. She had a small room that the company she worked for found for her. She paid 7000 Baht per month, which meant that I ended up paying 3500 per month when I moved in. That is a lot of money for someone working as a waitress in a restaurant, but I did not have the conscience to just leave her having to pay the entire amount by herself, so I stayed for a while. I barely had money for food though, and often had to ask my siblings if I could borrow some money.

3.5.6 Tao's Eating Habits

Although Tao is used to eating everything, she does mention Isan food as being something she cherishes and something that she will always eat no matter how much money she has. She mentions fried frog, grilled eel with salt, eggs laid by red ants and papaya salad with fermented fish as her favorite local foods. The majority of the foods found in Tao's district are extremely similar to that which can be found in the area near Poon's parents' house, and they both prefer sticky rice over jasmine rice, any time. Their eating habits when in Isan, are both controlled by what is in season, and what is in season at one time is usually the same for the both of them. Tao complains that she has a hard

time finding Isan style foods in Bangkok for a relatively cheap price, and often has to resort to eating other foods because of the steep prices of the food she favors, or she might decide to spend a little extra to satisfy her tastebuds.

Tao claims that she spends almost 200 baht on food a day on average, which is almost double of what my other case studies and interviewees said that they spend. This means that Tao spends over half her salary on food, which leaves her with very little to spend on other items for herself. She spends almost 4000 baht on transportation alone, and if you deduct that as well as her other fixed expenses including rent from her salary, there is not much remaining. She does not remember the last time she bought an item of clothing, and when friends compliments her on her looks asking if she has been to a weight-loss clinic or a beauty salon, she laughs,

I do not have money to spend on those silly things. I remember when I lost a lot of weight and people kept asking where I had been going, I had no answer. I am dirt poor, and there is no way I would ever be able to afford treatments or even make-up. I am a foodie, through and thorough, and if I have money to spend, I will spend it on food. I see no reason to spend it on anything else. Good food is what makes me happy, especially good Western food.

On an average weekday, Tao will have, as mentioned earlier, bread and coffee for breakfast. For lunch she prefers to eat noodle soup or fried chicken with sticky rice, which she buys from a street stall near her work place. Her salary does not include food, and so she has pay for it on her own. She explains why she favors noodle soup for lunch,

I used to be overweight. I did lose a bit of weight when I was with the father of my child, and I think the reason why I have been able to keep my weight down, is because I eat noodle soup almost every day for lunch. It is low in calories and the liquid keeps me full for a long time, so I do not crave anything else. Sometimes I even eat noodle soup twice a day. It never gets boring. My friends comment on how great I look, and the noodle soup is definitely filling.

I asked Tao to keep a food journal for one week. Over the course of that week, she noted that she ate dinner at an upscale Thai restaurant three times, that she had dinner at a Japanese restaurant once and as for the remaining days, she ate Isan food at a local food stall. She explained that she has just gotten her salary the week before she started journaling, and wanted to splurge on dinner. She also had some friends visiting, so it was the perfect occasion to enjoy nice dinner. She often goes for pizza with her close friend Mon, and says that they have several things in common and enjoy the same foods. She always needs to drink Pepsi with her pizza, and says that the experience is not complete without it.

When asking Tao why she enjoys Western food so much, she mentions her four trips to the UK with a former boss as the period when she truly fell in love with Western food. Although at that time she could not communicate in English, she enjoyed the food and mentions fish and chips over and over again as a dish she has fond memories of. She says,

It was really a shame. I wish I would have been able to speak English, and I am sure I would have gotten much more out my stay. But at least I enjoyed the food. Actually, there was not that much of it, at least not before dinner, and bread is not as filling as rice. So I kept sneaking into the kitchen for some tea and cookies, and the chef, who happened to be a sweet Thai woman, kept feeding me these delicious treats. No wonder I gained weight. I really enjoyed the food though, and I remember having strawberries and cream for dessert. There was always dessert. Dinner was such a heavy meal, and I ate everything I could. When we were not eating, we were out watching polo matches and hunting.

Although Tao is very verbal about her love for Western food, she is fond of other foods as well, and lists Indian and Japanese as her new interests. In the past, she never considered the idea of trying Indian food and she says that it was not something that seemingly appealed to her. Yet when a friend invited her to eat at an Indian establishment

in the area of Silom* in Bangkok, she agreed to go and says that to her surprise, she liked the food. She never frequents a restaurant by herself, and will only go to a new venue if a friend or an acquaintance puts in a recommendation. She says that she cannot spend money at restaurant with poor food, and that going by a friend's recommendation is the only way she can know that she will not be disappointed. If she does discover a venue that she really likes, she will continue going back the same venue knowing that they will serve her good food. She wants the best food that she can possibly afford, and she would rather splurge on pizza from Pizza Hut or Pizza Company, which she knows will taste good, rather than buying cheaper pizza that lacks in taste.

3.5.7 Tao's new boyfriend and how they bond over food

While until just recently, Tao's siblings all helped support their parents financially, but Tao's recent relationship with a 40-year-old German man who she met through Facebook, seems to have changed the dynamics of the willingness to support the parents. Now they all now expect Tao to be the sole provider, thinking that her boyfriend will provide for them all. After having dated long distance for six months, and only met once in person, the German boyfriend sends Tao 5000 baht a month, which she gives to her parents to cover the costs of raising her son. Her boyfriend works with installing emergency equipment in Germany, and makes, according to Tao, a good living. She herself makes a total of 10,000 baht from her two other jobs, which she first and foremost spends on food and housing for herself. Tao talks to her boyfriend via Skype every night from the local internet shop on her street. She has never owned a computer, and hopes that her boyfriend might buy her one some day.

I actually had a bit of trouble tracking Tao down for an interview because her phone was broken and she could not afford getting it fixed or buying a new one, and so she was waiting for her boyfriend to bring her a new one. But she explains that her

* The major financial district of Bangkok, which is bustling with restaurants.

boyfriend has trust issues and that he does not understand why she has to help support her family financially,

John (Tao's current boyfriend) has previously been in two relationships with Thai women. They both cheated on him and took his money, so I can understand why he is a bit apprehensive about our relationship. He does not like me talking to other men, but I am just friendly of nature. I do not want anyone else. But at the same time, I need to be with someone who can help support my family. That is my top priority in life. They do not get a decent pension like people do in Germany and in other Western countries. The culture is different. And if he does not understand this, I think we might have a problem. It is funny, I can see on my Facebook that a whole bunch of girls from my school has Western boyfriends. I do not know why that is, but it is rather strange. I never thought people from my poor area would be able to move on and up.

As I am chatting with Tao one Monday evening, she tells me that her boyfriend is coming to see her from Germany the following day and that she is planning on introducing him to her family. She wants me to have dinner with them, but sadly I already had plans that would have been difficult to cancel. She talks about his arrival,

I want him to meet my friends. I have known them longer than I have known him, so it is only natural that we all get together. I am not big on romantic gestures, and we will be able to spend time alone together when we travel down to Phuket anyway. I wanted to take my son with me to Phuket, but my boyfriend says that it is not a child-friendly zone. He likes to drink and he likes to have fun. We will probably go to a Thai restaurant when he arrives here in Bangkok. He likes food with coconut milk, such as massaman curry.* Last time he was here,

* A southern dish that is muslim in origin and contains coconut milk, roasted peanuts, potatoes, bay leaves and a variety of spices.

he tried to order other kinds of curry, but the staff would just assume that he wanted green curry. *They always think that is the only curry foreigners want. So we always joke about ordering green curry.

Tao says that she never thought that she would have a farang* boyfriend, and that she feels like people are always staring at them when they are together, in particular, other Thai women. When walking on the street together, she says that she lets her boyfriend walk first, and she will follow. The one thing she is not concerned with, however, is how similar their eating styles are. Tao started eating Western foods as soon as she got a taste of it while living in Roi-Et, and mentions that she ‘was probably a Westerner in a previous life.’ She got her first taste of bread and coffee while in Roi-Et, although she is not able to remember her first ‘encounter’ with Western food. But she has been eating Western foods since then. Her boyfriend appreciates that they can go to the same restaurants and both find something they like. She elaborates,

These days I eat bread with cheese or jam and instant hot coffee every morning before work. I cannot start my day without it. Sometimes I will have cereal with sliced bananas and milk, but not too often. I saw my boss eating it, and decided that I wanted to try some as well. There is just something so soothing and filling about Western food, and if I had to choose between Isan food and the former, it would be hard to pick. If I had both in front of me, I would probably eat half of each.

When asking Tao why she enjoys Western food so much, she mentions her four trips to the UK with a former boss as the period when she truly fell in love with Western food. Although at that time she could not communicate in English, she enjoyed the food and

* A spicy curry made with coconut milk known for its sweetness.

* The Thai word for Western foreigner.

mentions fish and chips over and over again as a dish she has fond memories of. She says,

It was really a shame. I wish I would have been able to speak English, and I am sure I would have gotten much more out my stay. But at least I enjoyed the food. Actually, there was not that much of it, at least not before dinner, and bread is not as filling as rice. So I kept sneaking into the kitchen for some tea and cookies, and the chef, who happened to be a sweet Thai woman, kept feeding me these delicious treats. No wonder I gained weight. I really enjoyed the food though, and I remember having strawberries and cream for dessert. There was always dessert. Dinner was such a heavy meal, and I ate everything I could. When we were not eating, we were out watching polo matches and hunting.

Although Tao is very verbal about her love for Western food, she is fond of other foods as well, and lists Indian and Japanese as her new interests. In the past, she never considered the idea of trying Indian food and she says that it was not something that seemingly appealed to her. Yet when a friend invited her to eat at an Indian establishment in the area of Silom* in Bangkok, she agreed to go and says that to her surprise, she liked the food. She never frequents a restaurant by herself, and will only go to a new venue if a friend or an acquaintance puts in a recommendation. She says that she cannot spend money at restaurant with poor food, and that going by a friend's recommendation is the only way she can know that she will not be disappointed. If she does discover a venue that she really likes, she will continue going back the same venue knowing that they will serve her good food. She wants the best food that she can possibly afford, and she would rather splurge on pizza from Pizza Hut or Pizza Company, which she knows will taste good, rather than buying cheaper pizza that lacks in taste.

* The major financial district of Bangkok, which is bustling with restaurants.

3.5.8 Tao's feelings towards Kung

Tao used to go for dinner with Kung on a regular basis, but is no longer able to. She elaborates on the reasons as for why this is,

I do not want to say anything bad about Kung, but we are no longer as close as we used to be. She gets embarrassed by the way I put everything on my pizza. I feel like I want to get my money's worth, and so if there is anything free that I can add on my pizza, like cheese or ketchup, I will. I always add ketchup and oregano. Kung does not seem to like that. And even though we are from the same province and speak the same dialect, she will only speak Thai with me when we are in public. I guess she is embarrassed that other people will know that she is from the northeastern region of Thailand, as if that is not good enough. Her skin is white and she could pass for being from Bangkok, and for some reason that seems to be important to her. She does not seem as interested in our local culture, and she rarely visits her parents, and so I feel like I have much more in common with Mon. She understands me, and even though I have only known her for a few months, nowadays I get along much better with her than I do with Kung.

Tao also explains how Kung does not understand why Tao is so committed to caring for her parents,

My boyfriend does not understand why it is so important that I send money home, and neither does Kung. I found out through our mutual friend, Mon, that she thinks I am too committed to my parents. She says that once one is in a serious relationship, then one does not have to be responsible for one's parents to the same extent. Perhaps Kung should date my boyfriend. They would be a perfect match.

In addition to studying English with me, Tao has been taking German lessons once a week with a Thai lady who is fluent in German. She explains that if a Thai person wants to move to Germany with a spouse, they have to learn German and pass an exam before being allowed into the country. Luckily, the current family she works for happens to be German, and because they do not speak English very well, she is able to use her German language skills to excel at her job as well as practice her language skills.

Although she has only met her boyfriend a total of two times, he is planning on her moving to Germany to live with him soon, and he is very eager for her to join him there. She says that hopefully she would be able to bring her son with her, and give him a better life. She also knows that the salaries are higher in Germany, and that living there gives her the opportunity to provide a better life for her parents. I asked her if she had ever tried German food, she said no. But knowing how fond Tao is of Western food, I think she will have no trouble getting used to the food.

3.6 Case Study 6 – Pim

3.6.1 Historical Background

Pim is a 48-year-old female from Tha Tum district in the northeastern province of Surin. Surin is located between the Mun river in the north and the Dongrek mountain chain in the south, which is the border region between Thailand and Cambodia. To the west you find Buriram and to the east there is Sisaket province. The province is located approximately 450 kilometers east of Bangkok and has an area of over 8000 square kilometers. Surin was an important part of the Khmer empire, and the province is believed to be approximately 2000 years old. At that time it was known as Khu Prathai Village, and its present name was given in 1786. In 1922, Surin was exposed to the wider world with the advent of the railroad. Both Indian and Chinese merchants decided to settle in Surin, and manufacturing increased. Today there is a large Khmer population in Surin, and it has been reported that 47.2 percent of the population are capable of speaking the Khmer language. Pim and her family are also Khmer-speaking, and they will always

switch from Thai to Khmer when in all Khmer company. Surin is subdivided into 17 districts. Tha Tum district, where Pim is from, is located in the northern part of Surin province, and has a population of almost 100,000.

3.6.2 Pim's Family Relations

Pim is the oldest of three siblings. She has a younger brother who lives at home with her father in Surin and a younger sister who is married to a US citizen and is currently living on the west coast of the US working as a pharmacist. Her father is a retired farmer, and spends his days at home. Her mother died when she was still in primary school, and her father has since remarried. Pim is close to her stepmother, but says that nothing can replace her mother's love. Prior to her mother's passing, Pim had already met the man she thought she was going to marry. But when her mother died, her family had to take up a loan from the bank to get by. At that time, borrowing money was not something to be proud of, and it would often be frowned upon. So as soon as it became known to friends and acquaintances that Pim's family had taken up a loan, the family of the man Pim was going to marry decided that Pim was not good enough for him anymore, and demanded that he cancelled his plans to marry her. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Pim says,

It was not easy. We were meant for each other, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this man. I know he is now living with his wife in a southern province, and thinking about him and the life we could have had, is something I cannot stop myself from doing. My father started drinking, and we were all suffering. Everything went down hill the day my mother died. But we had to move on, and we did. Everyone now thinks I have never had love in my life, which is not true. But I lost it, and I never found it again.

Pim was forced to drop out of school after B4, and has worked almost every day since then, providing for her family. Her father did not have the resources to send her to

school, and with two other siblings to care for, Pim became the main breadwinner of the family. She has remained single, and has given up on the dream of one day getting married. She said,

I am too old now. I want to focus on my friends and my family, and take joy in what I have. Life brought me to this point, and I believe there is a reason why things are as they are. I would have loved to be an aunt, but my sister cannot have children, so I do not see that happening. These days I just work and send as much money home to my father and his wife. Of course I keep some for myself, but not much.

3.6.3 Pim's Employment History

Pim has spent most of her adult life working in a sweatshop in Nakhon Pathom, sewing garments. She lives close to her workplace, and has to clock in at 7.30am every morning. Pim claims that she is never late, the reason being that there will be severe consequences if that happens. She did not elaborate on these consequences, but said that it involved a cut in salary. She works overtime almost every day, and does not get more than four or five hours of sleep at night. She gets one day a week off, which is when she would come and study with my in Bangkok. I taught Pim for a total of three years. Every Sunday she would travel to Bangkok from Nakhon Pathom by bus, and then return to Nakhon Pathom in the evening. She would spend about three hours each way depending on traffic, and she very rarely missed a class. She said that her Burmese neighbors would start singing and playing music early in the morning, so she had to leave her room regardless. She would watch the news in English for ten minutes every morning before leaving her room, while taking notes about what she heard. She would then bring those notes to class and ask me questions about what she had heard on the news.

The rules at the factory where she works are very strict. You are not allowed to bring more than three pieces of candy in with you. You are not allowed to talk to anyone

while working, and you have to wear a mask covering your mouth and nose. You are only allowed a certain time in the bathroom, and if you happen to exceed that time, someone will be calling for you just from outside the stall. You are given a forty-five minutes lunch break, and ten minutes in the afternoon to nap. The Japanese boss will often talk to the staff regarding work matters while they are eating lunch, so the only time Pim gets to unwind is during those ten minutes in the afternoon. Pim is not too fond of her boss, as she explains,

He is a strange character. Sometimes he keeps saying 'I want girl, I want girl,' and he wants us to find someone for him. It is very unprofessional and very uncomfortable. I do not know if all Japanese men are like this, but I hope not.

I have often asked Pim why she does not apply for another job. Each time she says that no one else would employ her because of her age, and that there is nothing else she can do. She explains,

If you do not have a university degree, it is hard to get a new job if you are over 35 years old. Most people who employ those without any special skills or knowledge care more about looks and age than anything.

For example, Pim says that she does not know how to iron, and therefore would make a terrible housekeeper. In the past, I have on several occasions walked around in shopping centres with Pim. We have walked past shops that the sweatshop where Pim works makes clothes for. Pim tells me the details about how the clothes are made, and is always surprised when she gets to see the price, which is much higher than what Pim would expect. She, herself, would never enter one of these shops, and she never buys clothes for herself. Everything she wears, including her accessories, happen to be

presents from friends and family. The denim bag she carries around is about twenty years old, and looks like it should have been thrown out years ago. Despite this, Pim has no plans to part with the bag and thinks it would be a huge waste of money to purchase a new one, despite it almost falling apart. She says,

Why should I ever have to buy new clothes when friends also give me the clothes they do not wear anymore. I got the bag from my sister, my pants were a present from a friend, and my shirt and shoes were a present from my niece. She used the shirt for a few years, then got sick of it. I do not see the need to buy new items when I already have more than enough. I feel good in what I wear, so why should I have to buy new things.

3.6.4 Visiting Pim in Surin

It was when I was doing research with Dom in Buriram that I got the opportunity to visit Pim's family for a day. Pim called me when I was in Buriram, asking if we would like to visit. I had previously asked if I could visit Pim in Surin, but she declined by request saying that the toilet was not working and that she needed to do some repairs on the house before they could accept visitors. Pim and her family were affected by the serious flood in 2011, which caused Pim having to flee her room in Nakhon Pathom while trying to save as many items as she could. The water came before she knew it, and because she lived on the ground floor, she had to pack her things while the water was rising around her. She had received no warning that the water would hit so fast. She initially went to stay with a close relative in the southern part of Thailand, before finding a way to travel back to her father in Surin. She went without much food for days, and the events took an extreme toll on both her physical and mental well-being. Her workplace was also flooded, and the rice fields, which belong to her father in Surin, were destroyed. Luckily, the water did not reach their houses, but Pim had to take an extensive break from work while they were waiting for the water to recede. She did, however, have to return to

work before the water had receded completely, living on the 2nd floor of the factory and traveling by boat in the instances she had to leave the company. The living conditions at the factory were grim, and as a single woman without children, she barely got any space. The workers were excused from wearing their uniforms, and did their laundry in the common sink by the sleeping area. Today Pim has found a new residence, on the 5th floor. She says that it is not as nice as her old room, and that she is still trying to purchase all the items that she needs and that were lost in the flood, but at least she is no longer on the ground floor and will be better prepared for another flood.

Pim and her niece drove from Surin to Kai's house in a minibus to pick us up. We drove back to Pim's parents house in Surin, with Kai, Ben and all their children, nieces and nephews in tow. Before arriving at their house, we stopped at an elephant farm in Surin. Surin is famous for its elephants, but they were chained up and Pim felt sorry for them. We were greeted by Pim's father and stepmother, who were sitting on the patio in front of their old house. Their new two-storey house is located just next to the old house, looking very out of place in its surroundings. All the houses in the area look similar to their old house, and I could not spot another house, which was as grand as their new house. In stark contrast to the old wooden house, which is where Pim and her siblings grew up, the new house resembles something you would see in a soap opera. While showing us around the new house, Pim talks about the work that has gone into it.

My younger sister bought the house seven years ago. She paid three million baht, and did not save any money for furniture or a fence. We do have a garage, but we do not have a car to park there. My sister has not seen the house since it was built, and I do not know when she will get around to it. It is so much work. My parents prefer the old house, although they will come over here to sleep. They only sleep on the floor in the living room though, even though there are beds in a couple of the bedrooms. My brother refuses as much as to enter the house. The toilets are not working because no one dares to use them, and so we still have to use the one outside by the entrance. We have asked people to come and fix it, but nothing is being done. And the house needs to be repainted, but we do not have

the money right now. We keep the doors locked with a bicycle lock – we have to be aware of possible intruders.

While Pim was showing us around the new house, Kai could not stop saying how much she wished it was her house and that she some day could only hope to be living in a house just like that. She appeared completely oblivious to the fact that the house was totally empty, fenceless and windows were broken, and seemed mesmerized by the size of it. The children were equally impressed, and decided that they wanted to move into the house. There was a television and a sofa downstairs, with the plastic covers intact. After getting a tour of the house, Kai made herself comfortable in the outdoor kitchen by the old house, cooking up a storm. Pim let her take control of the kitchen, and she made mackerel and omelets.

3.6.5 Pim's Sister and Plans for Moving Abroad

Pim is extremely close to her younger sister, even though they are not able to see her very often. They talk on the phone several times a week without having anything special to talk about. She often talks to me about her sister and her sister's husband, and seems eager to share any information about the couple. Her sister comes to visit with her husband every few years, and Pim talks admiringly about their visits,

John (her sister's husband) took us all out for dinner in Surin. The bill came to 6000 baht, and he gave the staff 600 baht in tip. I have never seen anyone tip like that. He is such a generous man, such as kind man. My sister is incredibly lucky to have found someone like him. Their wedding was amazing. They got married at our property, and there was so much food and so much joy. I will never forget that day. It is a shame I do not see her often, but our phone conversations

are very pleasant. It is always embarrassing when her husband picks up the phone though, which he usually does. But he knows who I am now and it is easy.

Her sister is not able to have children, which leaves Pim's father with no grandchildren. Pim and her brother have over the last decade been applying for a visa to join her sister in the US, but it has yet to be approved. She has been informed that she might be granted her visa within a year, but she does not want to get her hopes up in case she gets rejected. She has taken all the required vaccinations, and so has her brother. She does not seem worried about moving to a foreign land at all, and says she looks forward to what might lay head. Although Pim had spoken frequently about her sister, I was not aware that she had a brother until I was able to visit her and her family in 2011, and even then the brother would not come out from his house to greet us.

3.6.6 Pim's Food Preferences and Opinions on Western Food

The people in Surin eat a similar diet to those in Buriram, and Pim eats mainly papaya salad and fried chicken with sticky rice. She ate this before she left for Bangkok, and she has been eating it almost every day since she left Surin. She is also very fond of durian*, which she eats as often as it is in season. She usually has special clothes for these occasions, as she knows in advance that she will gain weight due to the high caloric intake of the fruit.

Ever since Pim moved to Bangkok almost 25 years ago, her diet has not changed dramatically. She does not spend much money on food, and she will have a portion of papaya salad and sticky rice daily, which she says are her favorite foods. She eats all of her meals at work when she is there, and on her days off, she will buy food from street vendors and local restaurants. She does not have her own kitchen, but she has her own rice cooker, so that she can always enjoy jasmine rice with her food. Until I met here

*A fruit famous for its smell when it is ripe.

three years ago, she had never been to a Western fast food restaurant or any other restaurant selling Western food. We went to a burger place once and she ate the burger upside down, not knowing that there was a top and a bottom bun. She talked about the reasons as to why she had never entered a Western establishment,

If I entered a Western eating establishment on my own, I would not know what to do. I really never had any reason to, and the food is so expensive anyway. I did not know how to eat a burger or how to eat the chicken at KFC, yet alone how to order. If I were to go to one of those establishments, I would need someone to go with me to show me what to do. I am old enough not to care too much about the other guests, but I would still be conscious of them observing me. I always eat what I know how to eat, which is papaya salad and fried chicken. I also like fish and various vegetables, but you cannot get that at McDonald's. I never had coffee until I got some free from Starbucks, and I could not handle it. My heart was beating so fast after just two sips, that I quickly regretted it. If we are going out to dinner, I do like to go to MK. There I know how to order, and I know that I will like the food. I have been there several times over the last few years, and that is where I go if I am going to treat myself.

Pim does not have any special preferences when it comes to non-Thai food, and can eat just about anything. If someone else can order her food and she does not have to worry about interacting with the staff, she can eat whatever is on the table. She is a healthy woman is not scared of finishing off a plate of food if no one wants it. She always has food on hand, whether it being fruit or something more substantial. We have made several trips together to different floating markets over the last three years, and she has always made sure that I did not go hungry, and always made the initiative to buy food and drinks. It was during one of our travels that I noticed how Pim does seem to care whether she is eating in a quiet or a noisy environment. We were having breakfast, and just next to the outdoor breakfast area, was a construction site. Pim and her family were sitting there reading the newspaper and drinking coffee, while construction workers were

hammering bolts into the ground. They were completely oblivious to the noise and could not understand why anyone did not want to join them for breakfast.

Pim is a woman who is still in the process of finding her way in the modern world. She prefers the simple life, but at the same time tries to ingrate into the modern world by watching the news in English and by eating hamburgers and Western food when the occasion arises, even Japanese food from time to time. She has family who she loves to travel with, and they often try new venues.

3.7 Conclusion

From the information gathered from the case study informants, it is apparent that each case study informant has their own very unique perspective of Western fast food and the role it plays in their lives. They each choose to consume Western fast food for different reasons and on different occasions, and how they incorporate the Western fast food into their lives varies between the informants. While Lek and Tao cherishes each bite of pizza and KFC, and will go as soon as they receive their monthly salary, Araya will only visit fast food venues with family and when invited by friends.

In the following chapter the advantages of globalized food will be analyzed. The occasions and reasons as to why the case studies use Western fast food will be analyzed further, and also why the informants appear preferential to certain venues. Additionally, a table comparing the informants daily consumption to their consumption of Western fast food can be found in chapter four.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

Inevitably, modern communications and the movement of people into the capital has meant a blurring of our regional differences. Once, a visit to the north meant the chance to sample a whole new cuisine, now it is more the opportunity to savour the best of a style of cooking one is already familiar with. (Bhumichitr 1988:131 as quoted in Penny Van Esterik, 1992: 182)

In this chapter we will investigate the advantages of globalized food and analyze the ways in which the case study informants use the Western fast food space.

4.1 The Advantages of Globalized Food

4.1.1 Accessibility

In Bangkok, branches of both KFC and McDonald's can be found throughout the city. They have both made a conscious effort to position themselves as outlets affordable to middle and lower income earner, making them an option for consumption among the case study informants. They are located in upscale shopping centers, in business centers, in so-called 'Supercenters' such as Big C and Tesco Lotus, and as freestanding shops in various locations. Even small franchises of these two chains can be found at certain mass transit stations, offering a quick bite on the go. They are usually open for long hours, and in some locations they never close. Having these venues placed in such convenient locations, makes it convenient for most people to visit. The bright lights, the see-through doors, the colorful menus and interior, and the informal staff uniforms, all contribute to

create a welcoming atmosphere, while at the same time appealing especially to the younger generation.

4.1.2 Cleanliness/Coolness

Living and working in a hot and humid city like Bangkok, escaping the heat by visiting an air-conditioned venue might be considered a luxury for many. In addition, frequenting a clean space where the staff empties your tray and wipes your table, might seem more appealing than eating street food along a busy road with a cloud of pollution hanging over your seat. McDonald's and KFC outlets are standardized, and whichever branch one ventures to, one can expect the same high level of cleanliness and the room temperature is normally set at a comfortable, cool level.

4.1.3 No Time Restraints/no "hidden" costs

Several researchers, including Beng Huat (2000) and Watson (1998) found that customers have a tendency to linger longer at McDonald's outlets in Asia than in the US. Students are not discouraged to do their homework at the premises, and groups of children or young adults can often be seen hanging out at these venues for hours on end.

The fairly new McCafe in Bangkok, which is usually situated within a McDonald's outlet, offers a variety of coffee drinks and cakes that clearly illustrates that McDonald's is not necessarily just a venue for merely "fast consumption." While McCafe in Western countries is at a different venue altogether from the regular McDonald's restaurants, having both in the same space, reduces the feeling of having to eat and leave the venue as soon as one is satisfied.

Frequenting a venue where you order at the counter and bring your own food to your own table, reduces the need of tipping the staff. This practice can also be avoided

when visiting street food venues and food courts, and reduces the amount of money required to spend at a certain venue. While other restaurants perhaps include a service charge in the bill or at least expect to receive a tip, fast food venues eliminate the need to worry about this extra expense.

4.2 KFC versus McDonald's

Despite there having been conducted extensive research on the topic of McDonald's in various Asian societies, particularly Singapore, my respondents barely mentioned McDonald's, as they were talking first and foremost about KFC. It appears that they have a closer relationship with Colonel Sander than the Golden Arches. Their younger family members, however, were eager to discuss McDonald's and their famous hamburger. These findings are similar to the findings of Beng Huat (2000) in Singapore. The children are the most eager to eat hamburgers, as they are perhaps more familiar with the items than their older relatives. The preference for KFC by the adults does correspond with previous findings (See Collins, 2008). Individuals prefer food they are familiar with, and the fried chicken at KFC is very familiar to most Thai consumers, from every area of Thailand.

Humans cling tenaciously to familiar foods because they become associated with nearly every dimension of human and social life... Food thus entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties. Eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of culture. (Gabbacia 1998: 8, as quoted in Collins, 2008).

4.3 The KFC Preference

Through my own personal observations in Thai homes, fried chicken is found on most dinner tables throughout the country. It can be purchased at most markets, any time. It is a dish which pleases the palate of most people, children as well as adults. Fried chicken, as street food, is readily available at most markets, and at a price that the majority of the population can afford. It is simple to purchase and to eat, and usually comes with sticky rice. It is what would be considered as 'finger food,' which is exactly the kind of food many people from Isan perhaps favor. Therefore, if KFC sells a product that Thai consumers are familiar with, and perhaps does not appear as foreign as other Western food, such as the hamburger, then KFC inserts itself into the local culture, removing, to an extent, the 'exotic' or 'foreign' factor. This is in line with how McDonald's has inserted itself into the Singaporean culture, which is the completely opposite from what it does in France, where it markets itself against local culture (Beng Huat, 2000: 5).

At KFC in Thailand, you do not necessarily feel the sense of urgency and rush. The atmosphere is relatively warm and you are encouraged to linger, which shows that the fast food chain adapts to fit into the culture, as opposed to trying to force the culture on its consumers. In terms of queuing at the counter, costumers are usually not as patient as their American counterparts, and they, from my observation, often trying to find a place as close to the counter as possible, while at the same time trying to get the attention of an employee.

KFC first came to Thailand in 1982, which has given the consumers plenty of time to familiarize themselves with the brand. Not a single case study informant showed a negative attitude towards KFC, and they all claimed that they visit the chain from time to time. With regards to McDonald's, they stated they did not perceive a burger and fries as a meal, nor were they very tempted by it, and therefore would rather spend their hard-earned money elsewhere. These statements do not differ from what Watson (1997) found in his research on Western fast food consumption in other Asian countries.

4.4 Choice of Location to Visit

All my case study informants were in agreement regarding the idea fast food restaurant, and where it was located seemed be of extreme importance. The informants said that, because they do not dare enter a high class shopping center where they feel out of place, they will only choose outlets in Supercenters such as Big C, or less intimidating shopping venues. KFC meets this need nicely by having outlets in various locations, from the nicest shopping center, such as SiamParagon, to smaller business centers, in close proximity to where my informants work and live. This also makes it possible to shop either before or after they have visited the fast food venue. Had they gone to venues such as SiamParagon, then would be less likely to have purchased anything in addition to the meal due to the higher price level. My informants often mention that they do their shopping on the weekends, which is also when they are most likely to frequent fast food venues. Therefore, visiting a venue such as Big C, is convenient in addition to it helping my informants multi-task their eating and shopping needs.

4.5 The Pizza Culture

Pizza is a product not similar to any Thai dish, yet my informants are fond of this food. They are equally as fond of pizza as they are of KFC, and they prefer Pizza Company to Pizza Hut. Pizza Company is a local chain, with local toppings such as *tom yam kung*. That they prefer this restaurant indicates that they do not solely need to frequent fast food restaurant that have come from the west, but also local chains with similar products are able to satisfy their desires, as long as the taste is up to par. The informants said that they visit pizza restaurants with friends, and prefer KFC or McDonald's when they have young siblings or cousins visiting, because of the play areas available at certain outlets. McDonald's is especially known for being a child friendly place, and also in Thailand are most branches equipped with a play area, where the children can play while the adults eat.

4.6 McDonald's

While my informants did prefer KFC to McDonald's, the large number of McDonald's outlets present in Bangkok and throughout Thailand cannot be overlooked. Ronald McDonald standing outside each branch, greeting its customers with a traditional Thai *wai*,* gives the consumer an immediate feeling of the localization of McDonald's in Thailand. The menus at McDonald's are equally as bright and easy to see as at KFC, and merely by pointing to a picture, either one a cardboard menu by the cash register or above, one can let the employee know what one wants to purchase, be it an individual item or a set menu. The price for the various items are written in large numbers, and because there is no extra service charge added to the cost, the potential customer can quickly and easily calculate the cost of a possible item or meal.

McDonald's offers local dishes or local versions of their international menu at every outlet to cater to local tastes. In addition to the popular Samurai Pork Burger, with teriyaki sauce, lettuce and mayonnaise, McDonald's in Thailand also sell fried chicken and spicy chicken wings. There are three flavors of pies available, which are corn, pineapple and a flavor which they change from time to time. For breakfast, rice soup with a variety of condiments is available, and they also offer particular rice dishes for daytime consumption.

Events and Occasions When Western Fast Food is Consumed:

4.6 Family Gatherings/Play Area

My case study informants mentioned that they all frequent Western fast food establishments, particularly KFC, on special occasions. Half of my informants mentioned that they prefer going to a Western fast food restaurant as opposed to an upscale Thai

* A wai consists of a slight bow, with the palm pressed together in a prayer-like way.

restaurant. We will discuss the reason for this below. These occasions include when family is visiting from their hometowns of Isan, in particular when their children, nieces and nephew are visiting. For someone living in Isan, especially for children, visiting KFC has almost become a 'requirement' for when they come down to Bangkok. Having these occasions taking place at establishments such as KFC, means that the informants are going to linger and spend time at the respective venue. This completely contradicts how 'fast food' is supposed to be consumed in the US, yet is encouraged by the employees. Local consumers take the 'fast' out of 'fast food.' Both the case studies and their families give meaning through these visits, by behaving a manner different to what it was initially intended to be.

4.6.1 McDonald as a Toy Distributor

Despite KFC being the preferred Western fast food chain among my informants, McDonald's is a popular restaurant, especially among children. It is one of the largest toy distributors in the USA, which is perhaps one reason why it is so popular among children. McDonald's distribute approximately 1.5 billion toys each year, which is mainly because there is a toy in each Happy Meal sold.

4.7 Pay Day or Work Promotion

As mentioned in the literature review, a visit to a Western fast food establishment for a lower-income Chinese family is a costly affair. This, without a doubt, extends to the lower income Thai families, as well as individuals. Most salaries do not exceed 10,000 Baht, and after having deducted the monthly expenses from the amount, there is not much remaining to spend on leisure activities. Therefore, these visits to KFC or McDonald's have to be saved for when the individual has the most money, which is of course when they have just been given their salaries. All of my case study informants mentioned that

they would always look forward to these visits, and that they would spend less and less money on food as the month progressed. At the end, ramen noodles for 5 baht a bag or sardines in a can for a similar price, are the only alternatives left when the funds run low.

While some, of course, want to visit KFC or McDonald's more often than their budget allows, all the informants exclusively make the visit when they get their salaries or they have something to celebrate, such as a work promotion. In the case of a work promotion or a birthday, the informants would then treat their friends to a meal. It is not common among the informants to let others pay for them on their birthday. It is the birthday girl who has to treat her friends, and KFC, with its standardized pricing, makes it a controlled affair. Having to wait and to save up the money, makes the anticipation of the visit even greater. The informants place great importance on the visit. They do not merely passively "consume" the meals, but they savor the experience, making it something special to remember. This completely contradicts the manner in which McDonald's was originally set out to be consumed.

4.8 Romantic Occasions

As Bak (1997) found when studying consumption of McDonald's in South Korea, couples will visit fast food venues for those special occasions. While this would seem absurd in the US, where fast food restaurants are only present for fast consumption, not for romantic moments. In Beijing, McDonald's has even set up a lover's corner, for the young men or women who need to take their partners out on a limited budget. My informants also mentioned that they would frequent McDonald's or KFC with their spouse or partner, considering the environment as romantic and comfortable, without having to worry about breaking the bank. They would also consider a pizza restaurant as an option, and mentioned that the environment at such a place is a little more romantic than that of KFC and McDonald's. At a pizza restaurant, there is table service and has less activities for children, making it an environment preferred by couples.

4.9 A Fast Food Restaurant as a Meeting Place

There are some KFC and McDonald's outlets, which are placed in very good locations. By good locations, I refer to locations which are close to skytrain stations, underground stations or to other easily accessed places. One of these locations is the downstairs area of Tesco Lotus at Onnut Sky train station. The McDonald's outlet, which is found there, is bright, comfortable and cheery, and having the easy access to Tesco Lotus, is something my informants find useful. The entire one side of the restaurant is made of glass and is facing the road, so that anyone walking by can see directly into the venue, and easily notice who is present. The venue is easily spotted, and my informants mentioned using this branch as a meeting place for friends and family. If one orders an ice-cream at 10 baht a piece, one can sit for long periods without any disturbances, which makes this the perfect location to use as a meeting place. Perhaps due to the heavy traffic in Bangkok and travel delays, it is easier meeting acquaintances at public venues as opposed to inviting people to your home. Selecting a fast food venue as a meeting point is convenient as the branches are usually easy to locate. Some of my case informants reside in their employer's residence or have their own small room elsewhere, creating a less than perfect location to entertain guests. Therefore, meeting in a public space where one can breathe easily, might be preferred.

The informants mention that from time to time they do not even actually have to enter the establishment, but often make plans to meet friends and family outside, and then go to another venue, such as the pork buffet, which can be found only minutes from this venue. In this way they use the location without possibly ordering anything, turning the restaurant nothing except a meeting place, which does not necessarily require consumption of its products.

4.10 Isan Women's Role in the Household

Females growing up in Isan are often taught to cook the local Isan cuisine from an early age, and it is not uncommon for a 7-year-old to play an important role in the kitchen, and at times even cooking without any adult supervision. During rice harvesting season, when the parents and other older family members have to spend most of the day and night in the fields, girls are often responsible for having dinner ready when the parents and other family members return home. While boys and men are not usually involved in cooking activities, they do help catch frogs and fish as well as slaughter animals before the cooking begins. As women rarely go out at night and especially in the rain, men can be found hunting for frogs at night in the rain while the women are at home preparing food, cleaning or looking after the children.

Women tend to go to bed early in the evening so that they can rise before the men in order to have breakfast ready by the time the men get up. According to local tradition, the daughters of the household are not supposed to sleep downstairs with the parents, but have their sleeping area on the second floor. It is, according to tradition, the youngest daughter of the household who bears the most responsibility in the kitchen, as well as being the person to care for the parents.

According to local Isan tradition, when family comes to visit from out of town, it is always their responsibility to cook. The girls, in particular in remote areas of Isan, do not venture far from where they live. Although they might leave their home to seek opportunities in the bigger cities after having finished primary or secondary school, this is often the first time they are spending a significant amount of time away from their homes.

When Isan women move away and come to visit their parents, their cooking style is often influenced by the food they eat in the area they have moved to. So if a woman returns to her parents for a visit after having lived in Bangkok for an extensive amount of time, the food she then prepares for her parents and other family members often bears similarities to the local cuisine found in the capital.

4.11 The Preference For Supercenters

After having completed the case studies and having had numerous conversations with women from Isan who are living and working in Bangkok, I found that the majority of these women prefer frequenting Supercenters as opposed to more upscale places. The biggest Supercenter in Thailand is Tesco Lotus. It has a total of 24 Supercenters in Bangkok and 31 Supercenters upcountry, in addition to almost 200 express stores and 15 value stores. Carrefour and Big C also operate in Thailand, but on a smaller scale.

Below are the reasons as to why these women have such a strong preference for these Supercenters and how they determine which particular outlet to frequent:

- Variety: In the Supercenters one can usually locate a variety of Western fast food outlets, including KFC and McDonald's, as can be found in other more upscale places. There is also the option of eating at the food court or at other Thai and international eateries. My informants mentioned that they usually go for som tam and sticky rice after having visited KFC, and having the opportunity to purchase both under one roof and in a comfortable environment, reduces travel time and exhaustion.
- Comfort: The Supercenters are air-conditioned and offer a place to escape from the heat. They are also relatively clean compared to outdoor markets, which increases the comfort factor.
- Cost: The cost is a crucial element when deciding which venue to frequent. The majority of the stalls and stores found in the Supercenters are generally of lower cost than the stores found in more upscale shopping centers, where luxury goods and services can easily be located. So while the fast food restaurants might be as costly as elsewhere, the other items available at the Supermarkets are of lower cost, making it an attractive venue for the lower class.
- Accessibility: The informants stated that they would frequent both Big C and Tesco Lotus depending on proximity to residence or workplace, and that they would either eat in the food courts or in the Western fast food restaurants,

depending on the circumstance.* In addition, one can purchase groceries and other items in the supermarket, reducing the amount of time needed to travel between the venues.

- Treatment Factor: More than one informant mentioned that they had selected their favorite McDonald's and KFC venues based on how the employees and the other customers seemingly acted towards the informants, and that these venues were always located in Supercenters on smaller malls found in residential or business areas. The majority of my informants would not frequent fast food restaurants in shopping centers where the majority of the customers were middle- or upper class, and they stated that they did not feel equal to the other customers in these places. The fact that the prices, the menus and the design of the venues do not change drastically from outlet to outlet did not seem to make a difference. Several of my informants mentioned that they would frequent more upscale shopping centers, like SiamParagon*, but only if going with a foreigner.

4.12 Western Fast Food Venues Versus Food Courts

Food courts are a common phenomenon in Bangkok, and can be found in every major shopping center and often in front of larger supermarkets, such a Tops.* These food courts are often known as food centers, as in the study by Gisele Yasmeen (2006). These food courts, usually placed within an air-conditioned facility, offer consumers a break from the heat of everyday life. The prices are similar to that of street food, yet food courts found in more expensive shopping centers are more costly than those found in Supercenters and the like. Visiting a food court usually involves changing money for coupons or a swipe card, queuing up at the food stall of the costumer's choice, and then carrying ones tray with the food to ones own table. The food is usually prepared quickly

* reason visiting the Western fast food outlets as can be found in events.

* One of the biggest shopping centers in Asia. It is, according to its website, designed to achieve an elegant European ambience.

* A grocery chain in Thailand, with as many as 65 stores around Bangkok.

or already on the counter reading for consumption. These practices are hardly any different from those at McDonald's or KFC, although one does not need to use coupons at these outlets.

My informants use food courts in much the same way as they use Western fast food restaurants. And because of the lower prices, the informants are able to visit these venues more frequently. Food courts are similar to that of Western fast food restaurants in that one can sit in peace without being bothered by staff telling asking if one would like to order more. The tables are cleared by staff immediate after a visit, and the venues are usually clean upon arrival. This service is offered without having to pay a service charge. At food courts, depending on the location, they mainly serve local Thai dishes as well as Western food, in form of spaghetti and pasta. These latter dishes are usually pricier than the local food, yet cheaper than the food purchased at fast food restaurants. I have on several occasions observed my informants order 'spicy spaghetti,' which is spaghetti fried with chilies, meat and other herbs. Ordering spaghetti is synonymous with splurging in the eyes of my informants, yet it is more affordable than Pizza Company, and you still get to enjoy the pleasures of the clean and air-conditioned space. Perhaps is this the ultimate way in which to localize the Western food consumption. Eating a Western dish, which is prepared in Thai manner, while sitting in a Thai establishment. The boundaries of what is Thai and what is foreign become blurry.

4.13 Observational Research at KFC

To investigate further how Isan women living in Bangkok actually consume the Western fast food, I followed a group of eight Isan women to a KFC outlet. Four of these eight women were my case studies informants, and the remaining four women were also my students. One person said that she would not be able to attend as she did not think she could afford the meal, so I offered to cover for her so that she would also be able to join the rest of the group. We travel as a group, after class, from our classroom to the KFC venue by minibus, and spent about one hour in total at the restaurant.

Venue: KFC at Central World.* I suggested visiting SiamParagon instead, but the informants did not appear eager. The majority of the group, however, stated that they had never visited Central World on their own, but that they did not mind going as a group. As none of the informants knew where KFC was located in Central World, it took a very long time for us to locate the venue on the fifth floor of the building.

Occasion: A Sunday afternoon visit. No special occasion was mentioned.

The Ordering Process: Kung and Araya, both my case study informants, were in charge of ordering the food. Although Araya rarely visits fast food restaurants, she did not appear to be the least worried about ordering and told the employee what she wanted to order by pointing to a picture of a set meal. The picture Araya placed an order for a large portion of a variety of regular chicken wings and thighs, which also came with individual cups of Pepsi. Araya was determined to keep the cost down, and the remaining group of students seemed to agree. They, therefore, did not order any french fries or any other side dishes. This particular meal was shared among seven of the eight women. Kung ordered her own meal, which consisted of a chicken burger with mashed potatoes, french fries

* The third largest shopping complex in the world, located in Bangkok.

and a drink. While the set of chicken that Araya had ordered was placed in the middle of the table, Kung sat at one end of the table with her own tray of food.

The Payment Process: Araya paid in cash for the chicken set without talking to the others first. At the end of the meal and before departing from the restaurant, they each paid an equal share. Kung paid for her own meal, and as she did not taste any of the chicken shared among the rest of the group, she did not pay for anything else.

How Did They Consume the Food: After having taken numerous pictures with their mobile devices, they sat down to eat. Each person used cutlery to consume the chicken legs and the chicken thighs. They used their own fork to take a piece of chicken to their own plate, and then used a knife and a fork to eat with. I asked them why they did not eat with their fingers, and they looked around while stating that all the other customers were also eating with cutlery. Lek was the only individual who eventually started using her fingers, but this was only after all the others had stopped eating and their gave their left-overs to Lek. Kung held the burger with her hands and only used a small plastic spoon for the mashed potatoes. The majority of the group were talking and laughing as they enjoyed their food, Lek was preoccupied with her chicken and did not appear interested in taking part in any of the discussions.

Food/Drinks Preferred

- Kung said that she ordered the burger set because she thought the meat that the others had ordered was too soft. She also said that she was very fond of the mashed potatoes and gravy, which was one of the reasons why she ordered that particular burger set.

- Although a large part of the menu at the various KFC outlets in Thailand is Asian inspired*, Aranya and another student, Yim, mentioned that they did not particularly like the spicy chicken alternatives or any of the rice dishes. They usually order just the regular crunchy chicken and then they go for something spicy, such as som tam, after having consumed the chicken at KFC. This last meal often takes place at a market or somewhere closer to where they live.
- The “standard” drink at KFC is Pepsi. Although one can order something else, including Sprite and Fanta, none of the students objected to receiving Pepsi and everyone in the group finished their drinks.

Topics of Conversation

The group were talking throughout the entire meal, but their voices were lowered and they appeared more aware of their surroundings than when we have previously eaten at lower-cost, local venues.

- **Korean Soap Operas:** Several of the students were avid fans of various Korean soap operas and this was the main topic of discussion among half of the group members.
- **Football:** Because the television screen next to the table was showing a football match, Araya spent a large portion of the time while at KFC talking about football and which team she thought would win the upcoming championship.
- **Yearly Bonus:** One of the women was complaining about not receiving a yearly bonus at her new job. She had expected to receive a decent sum by Christmas, but had yet to receive any extra money in addition to her monthly salary of 10,000 Baht. She is now considering leaving her current job, but will not do so unless she has received another job offer first as she cannot afford to go without a salary.
- **Skincare:** Two of the women discussed at lengths about different brands of sunscreens, and how sunscreen can prevent one from getting freckles.

* This refers to dishes that are meant to cater to Asian palates, by for instance, offering spicy chicken.

Chapter V

Conclusion

This study aimed to find an answer as to why ‘disadvantaged’ Thai women consume Western fast food, how it affects their identity as well as to what extent does hybridization of food consumption take place in their lives. The framework used was that of a postmodernistic take on globalization, which believes that the consumer is someone who will actively use mass-produced and mass-marketed commodities in ways other than those desired by or dictated by producers as projected through advertisements (Being Huat, 2000). Consumption is to be treated ‘as a process by which artifacts are not simply bought and consumed, but given meaning by the active incorporation into people’s lives’ (Jackson 1994: 209). Consumption as identity formation in this manner goes completely against the grain of the Marxist tradition. The consumers are not just passive receivers of information, they are creators who are able to find new cultural meaning in consumption, and adapt it to suit their own needs. Had, in fact, consumers only been passive recipients, then they would use McDonald’s and KFC in exactly the same manner as it is used in the US, which includes fast and excessive consumption.

Through the in-depth studies of my informants, it became apparent that they each have their own interpretation of Western fast food and their own ways in which to incorporate the fast food into their lives. The majority of the case studies consume items from these venues in the only manner they are able to: infrequent consumption. Compared to in the US, brands such as KFC and McDonald’s in Thailand are not at a price level so that everyone has the funds to purchase these items at any time. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a Chinese middle-class family has to spend a large portion of their salary just to afford one meal. And what does it mean that someone would be willing to spend such a large amount of money on such a meal?

The answer to this question is likely to be multi-faceted. First of all, my informants mentioned that they preferred KFC, with its juicy chicken, to any other

Western fast food establishment. Being that fried chicken is a well-known street food through-out Thailand, it does not come as a surprise that if one is able to purchase similar item while enjoying it in a comfortable air-conditioned establishment, then that is what they prefer.

The women in my study have not been exposed to Western food from birth, but learnt about the dishes when they first moved down to the central region after having finished school. They say that dishes that remind them of home or that one is familiar with, are dishes that one are to be attracted to. Dishes that carry an essence of familiarity are likely to be preferred to dishes one is less familiar with. In addition, many do not consider a hamburger a meal, while the chicken at KFC is more substantial. Similar to the results found in Bak's study (1997), children growing up with McDonald's are convinced that hamburger consumption is an indigenous food experience. My case study informants, however, are more familiar with fried chicken, which includes both the manner in which it is to be consumed as well as the taste of it. There is no cutlery and no specific knowledge regarding table manners is required. In addition, one can sit a Western fast food outlet for extended periods of time without being bothered by the staff, creating the perfect space to relax and enjoy a light meal. Therefore, they are not just passive consumers who eat what is available, but they choose items based on previous experience and familiarity.

Another way in which my informants tailored the consumption to their own needs is in the way they only purchase these items on certain occasions, and they do not leave the venue immediately. As for Western fast food restaurants in the United States, most visitors do not linger and it is certainly not encouraged. In Watson's study on consumption of fast food in Hong Kong (1997), he found that the average eating time for most Hong Kong customers was between 20 and 25 minutes, compared to 11 minutes in the United States, and that was in the business district of Hong Kong. Even if fast food restaurants are jammed with customers, the staff let people linger. In Seoul, the average sitting time was 35 minutes, where women averaged a longer sitting time than men.

My informants will mainly visit KFC or McDonald's when they have money to spend, which is usually at the beginning of the month. This period is their period of

consumption, and some informants mentioned that they will wait all month for this time to arrive. Towards the end of the month, those informants will then eat cheap substitutes such as ramen noodles and canned sardines, because they do not have much left of their monthly salary. In addition, if they have family visiting from Isan, then they will also take them to KFC. The case study informants all mentioned that they have very limited free time, and that spending this free time at an establishment such as KFC is ideal; especially when in the company of friends and loved ones.

It is considered a special occasion when someone steps into this establishment, and my case studies are able to enjoy some middle-class luxuries. As in Gerke's study on the middle-class (2000), he found that people, who could not afford most of the middle-class 'luxuries,' would buy McDonald's and hang out at the venues where they could be seen by others, showing the rest of society that they can afford to take part in the everyday life of the middle-class. In this manner, their lives would get a middle-class 'touch,' as most middle-class people would be able to afford McDonald's. However, Gerke (2000) here seems to refer to people who can afford McDonald's more frequently, and that it is goods, which are more costly than these items that they cannot afford. My case study informants, on the other hand, are not on the same level of society as this "almost middle-class" group of informants that Gerke is referring to. For them, despite being seen, it appears that it is more about the experience and stepping into a space that is moderately more exclusive than what they are used to, yet at the same time consuming food that they are familiar with. Although the "touch" of the middle class might be present, it is more about the entire experience as whole as opposed to just being seen or just letting people know that they are part of the middle class. Entering a foreign establishment where the case study informants would not know what to order, how to order and how to consume the food, is a situation they avoid. Going to KFC, they are familiar with all those elements. The menus are easy to understand with their bright images and prices highlighted in bold, and they still get to enjoy the luxury of a clean, bright space and are surrounded by people who are middle-class.

My case study informants mentioned only visiting KFC venues in regular shopping centers while staying away from the more upper class venues. This indicates

that, despite feeling that they have the occasional purchasing power to visit KFC, they do take their social status into consideration and perhaps look for venues where they do not feel like the distance between themselves and the other consumers is too large.

My informants frequently talked about being looked down upon by staff at Starbucks and certain other venues. Therefore, choosing a venue where they feel more equal to the staff, helps them to feel less out of place. At the same time, they use this purchasing power as sign of consumption power. This is in line with Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, where he claims that the market is segmented, and people desire to show off their styles of consumption and wealth (based on possessions). In his analysis, he concludes that the logic of social differences, through commodity purchase and usage, will become the determinant of human social differences (Suwanlaong, 2006).

Similar to that of Singapore, KFC and also McDonald's are establishments that can found throughout the city, in every block on almost every corner. This creates a feeling of normality, and that these fast food chains are just like any other outlet. The food is adapted to suit the tastes of the locals, while at the same time keeping their original meal ideas. For instance, here in Thailand, McDonald's have rice dishes for sale, including rice soup for breakfast. KFC has mango and sticky rice ice-cream, as well as spicier chicken options. The outlets markets itself into the local culture, taking out the "American-ness" of the experience and inserting the "Thai-ness." This is further confirmed if we look towards advertisements in the media, which demonstrate the limitations of globalization. Rather than just rolling out the same advertisement in every country, both KFC and McDonald's have to adapt their advertisements to suit the different cultures. So paradoxically, globalization itself has required companies to adopt a variety of localizing strategies in order to succeed commercially (Jackson, 2004).

My results in chapter four strengthens the hypothesis that 'the women interpret the consumption experience' in their own manner and localize the experience into their own culture. Globalized food consumption is hence transformed by the women to suit their own needs and desires. They only consume them on special occasions and for special reasons, it is not an everyday event. They also want to get the most out of the visit, which means not leaving the establishment for an extended period of time.

Interestingly enough, while they localize the consumption experience, they also stated that they did not care for the food items on the menu that had been tailored to Thai tastes, such as the spicy chicken. On the contrary, they preferred the classic version and found the tailored items not “to be delicious.” They would rather go for spicy Isan cuisine at a different venue after having paid a visit to KFC, saying that their “dining experience would not be complete without som tam and perhaps sticky rice.”

My second hypothesis was that ‘the women consume the fast food in order to emulate the higher classes. They use food consumption in an attempt to distance themselves from their own lower class, and they achieve a sense of self-worth as they are able to say that they are enjoying expensive taste.’ I found that the majority of my informants had no desire to distance themselves from their own class and seemed happy to be in the company of those with similar purchasing power. Yet they consumed the food and interpret the consumption experience in a different way than perhaps the upper classes. They interpret the consumption experience in a way that perhaps reflects the way in which they want to be perceived. In fact, they preferred visiting fast food outlets that were not in any of the up-scale shopping centers, indicating that they do not feel comfortable sharing a space with the upper class.

In conclusion, there is no simple equation of product consumption with imaginary consumption of a culturally desired other (Beng Huat, 2000: 198). The disadvantaged women consume Western fast food in ways that differ completely from how it is consumed in its country of origin, and they localize the experience in a manner that suits them. They treat it as something exclusive, something they can only afford once in a while and a place where, once they visit, they want to linger with friends and family members. They remove the word “fast” out of “fast food,” and focus on the venues as social spaces, where they have created their own use of the space, both in terms of symbolic and actual value. The advertisements are deliberately targeting the middle and the lower class, leaving the women with the impression that this is an appropriate restaurant for them. At the same time, they perceive the Western fast food chains, in particular KFC, as something familiar, which leaves the informants with the impression that it is a place where they are welcome. This particular perception of feeling welcome,

is extremely important in a country where the elite and the lower class usually do not mingle in the same small space.

References

- Askew, Marc. Interpreting Bangkok: The Urban Question in Thai Studies. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1994.
- Bak, Sangmee. McDonald's in Soul: Food Choices, Identity and Nationalism. In James Watson (ed), Golden Arches East, Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Beck, U. What is Globalization? Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Brown, J. D. The Shelf. Boston, Massachusetts: McGraw-Hill, 1998.
- Carrol, Walter F. Sushi: Globalization Through Food Culture: Toward a Study of Global Food Networks. Available from: http://www.icis.kansai-u.ac.jp/data/journal02-v1/31_Carrol.pdf (2011, Dec 12)
- Chua, Beng-Huat. Consumption in Asia. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Cook, I. and P. Crang. The World on a Plate, Journal of Material Culture 1(2): 131 – 153, 1996.
- Collins, Francis Leo. Of Kimchi and Coffee: Globalisation, Transnationalism and familiarity in Culinary Consumption. Social & Cultural Geography, 9, 2. (July 2008).
- Cooley, C. H. Human Nature and the Social Order. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.
- Dickens, P. Geographers and Globalization: (Yet) Another Missed Boat. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 2004. 29: 5-26.
- Dunn, Kirsten B. Fast Food Consumption: Application and Extension of the Theory of Planned Behaviour to Incorporate Affective Responses and Implicit Associations. Doctorate Thesis, School of Psychology and Discipline of Medicine. University of Adelaide, 2008.
- Fine, B. Debating Production-Consumption Linkage in Food Studies. Sociologia Ruralis 44: 332-342, 2004.

- Gerke, Solvay. Global Lifestyles Under Local Conditions: The New Indonesian Middle Class. In Chua Beng Huat (ed.), pp. 137 – 157. Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Haibo, Huang. Pretty Bourgeois Women. Beijing: Huawen Chubanshe, 2002.
- Harris, C. Whiteness as Property. Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality. L. M. Alcoff and E. Mendieta, eds. Pp. 75 – 89. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.
- Hanners, U. Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places. New York, Routledge, 1996.
- Hollis, N. Rethinking Globalization. Marketing Research, 21(1): 12-18
- Hooper, B. Globalization and Resistance in Post-Mao China: The Case of Foreign Consumer Products. Asian Studies Review 24, 439-70, 2000.
- Inglis, David and Debra Gimlin. The Globalization of Food. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009.
- Jackson, Peter. Local Consumption Cultures in a Globalizing World. Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, 2004
- Jameson, Frederic. Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. In New Left Review 146 (July – August): 55-92, 1984.
- Kearns, R. A. and J. R. Barnett. Happy Meals in the Starship Enterprise: Interpreting a Moral Geography of Health Care Consumption, Health and Place 6(2): 81 – 93, 2000.
- Kniazeva, M. and Venkatesh, A. Food for Thought: A Study of Food Consumption in Post-Modern US Culture. Journal of Consumer Behaviour 6, 2007, pp. 3 – 17.
- Le Heron, R. and D. Hayward. The Moral Commodity. Environment and Planning, 34: 2231 – 283, 2003.
- Leidner, Robin. Fast Food: Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Work. Berkley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Lien, M. and B. Nerlich. The Politics of Food. Oxford: Berg, 2004.
- Rofel, Lisa. Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

- Miller, D. Consumption and Commodities, Annual Review of Anthropology, 24 141-61, 1995.
- Miller, Jeff and Jonathan Deutche. Food Studies; An Introduction to Research Methods. Berg Publishers, 2009.
- Mintz, S. W. Food Culture and Energy. In Nutzenadel, A and F. Trentmann (ed.), Food and Globalization, Oxford: Berg.
- Mittelman, James H. What is Critical Globalization Studies? International Studies Perspective, no. 5 (2004): 219 – 230.
- Mulder, Niels. Mysticism and Everyday Life in Contemporary Java, Singapore: ISAS, 1983.
- Napat Sirisambhand and Dr. Christina Szanton. Thailand's Street Food Vending: The Sellers and Consumers of 'Traditional Fast Food.' Women's studies Programme, Chulalongkorn University, Social Research Institute, no. 5 (July, 1986).
- Parasecoli, Fabio. Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008.
- Pekajova, Livia and Jiri Novosak. Local Culture in the Era of Globalisation: Focused on the Zlin Region. In Beyond Globalisation: Exploring the Limits of Globalisation in the Regional Context (conference proceedings), 169-176. Ostrava: University of Ostrava, Czech Republic, 2010.
- Probyn, E. Mc-Identities: Food and the Familial Citizen. Theory Culture and Society 15: 155-173, 1998.
- Ritzer, G. The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Challenging Character of Contemporary Social Life. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge
- Robertson, R. Globalization. London: Sage, 1992.
- Robison, Richard and David Goodman. The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonald's and Middle Class Revolution. Routledge, 1996.
- Seabrook, J. Consuming Cultures: Globalization and Local Lives, Oxford, New Internationalist, 2004.
- Shields, Rob. Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption. Routledge, 1992.

- Suwanlaong, Sunate. Historical Development of Consumerism in Thai Society.
 Doctorate Thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Westfälischen Wilhelms University,
 2006.
- Tabor, D. L. Consumption Practices and Middle-Class Consciousness Among Socially
 Aware Shoppers in Atlanta. Anthropology Thesis, 13. 2006.
http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/antho_theses/13 (2006)
- Tomlinson, J. Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction. London: Pinter.
- Tunstall, J. The Media are American. London: Constable.
- Van Esterik, Penny. From Marco Polo to McDonald's: Thai Cuisine in Transition.
Food & Foodways. Vol 5, no. 2. (1992): 177 – 193.
- Walker, Marilyn. Food Consumption Survey. Conducted by Frank Small and Associates
 (unpublished), 1990.
- Walker, Marilyn. Thai Elites and the Construction of Socio-Cultural Identity.
 Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Department of Social Anthropology, York University,
 Toronto, 1991.
- Wall, Melissa. KFC into India: a Case Study of Resistance to Globalization Discourse.
Critical Studies in Media Commercialism. 2000.
- Watson, James L. Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia. 2nd Ed., Stanford,
 California: Stanford University Press, 2006
- Wilkinson, D. Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System,
 Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006.
- Wood, L. and S. Grosvenor. Chocolate in China: the Cadbury Experience, Australian
 Geographer 28 173-84, 1997.
- Yasmeen, Gisele. Bangkok's Foodscape. Bangkok: White Lotus Co., Ltd, 2006.

Bibliography

Helle Aasheim was born in Oslo, Norway. She graduated from the University of Oslo and the University of St Andrews, before deciding to pursue a PhD in Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. She enrolled in the program in 2007.