

Configuring an Ideal Self through Maintaining a Family Network: Northern Thai Factory Women in an Industrializing Society

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Abstract

This article explores unmarried factory women's family networks and personal identity formation in an industrial community in northern Thailand. It focuses on these young women's strong and sustainable ties to family members, and the importance of maintaining these ties in order to form a positive self-identity after leaving their rural villages. By maintaining reciprocal relationships with their families and contributing substantially to their rural households economically, these women are able to construct ideal images of themselves as dutiful village daughters while also approximating themselves to the image of "modern" women in the industrial community. Creating an ideal image of themselves illustrates the way that "modernity" and "tradition" are interpreted and embodied among these female factory workers. While theories about modernization have traditionally assumed that modernization weakens the ties among families, kin groups, and communities, more recent literature demonstrates that such theories are not applicable to many Asian societies. This study builds upon such research, revealing that in the case of young factory women in northern Thailand, family support networks actually enable these women to maximize their opportunities to work at the estate, contribute financially to their rural families, and gain some degree of financial independence and social autonomy. On the other hand, this study also shows that factory women's practice of maintaining family ties is not just a remnant of a village-based social norm, but takes on a new meaning in their new community. Retaining reciprocal relations with their families becomes an active and creative strategy young women use in order to adjust to the rapid social change in their community and to develop a positive self-identity.

Keywords: self-identity, family network, female solidarity, factory women, northern Thailand

I Introduction

From its beginnings, anthropological research on migration has continued to point to the importance of social networks, based largely on the existing kinship and friendship, for migrants in their new settlements [Boissevain and Mitchell 1973; Mitchell 1971]. For anthropology, a discipline sensitive to local contexts and micro-level cultural transformations, research questions about migration have focused less on the broad range of migratory flows than on articulating the differences between the place whence the migrant originates and the

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place or places to which he or she migrates [Brettell 2000]. Much of this work has focused on the move of people from the countryside to newer urban centers within developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Such studies have documented the ways that increases in industrialization and urban development have brought increased employment opportunities and deepened Western modernizing influences in many locations across the globe. Anthropological work on migration has also examined the social and cultural changes that take place within the lives of individuals and their families, examining the processes by which migrants and their households adapt to newly emerging urban settlements. The importance of kin and friend networks in cultural adaptation is an ongoing theme in the anthropology of migration, which continues to the present [*ibid.*].

The study of social networks in migration has gained new significance since the late 1980s, when anthropologists witnessed a renewed interest in global migration and transnationalism [Margolis 1995; Rouse 1995]. In the years since, anthropologists have focused on the detailed social and economic context in which migrants, their families and their communities operate, including an exploration of the way that migrants respond to global social and economic processes [Brettell 2000]. Their work has transcended the theoretical limitations of earlier frameworks that predicted the consequences of modernity in rigid and universal terms and also viewed the world as organized by bounded and internally homogeneous culture. The study of social networks in migration research since the late 1980s instead offers new theoretical insight into culture and society as fluid entities and the experience of modernity as locally distinctive. Migrants' continual ties to their communities of origin, for instance, suggest that home and host societies are not separate entities but combine to create a new arena of social action [Margolis 1995]. In a world where improved transportation and modern telecommunications have shortened the distance between the home and host societies, migrants' flexible movement back and forth across community boundaries or national borders changes the nature of such borders. Social networks mediate and facilitate such migrants' movements [Brettell 2000]. Moreover, recent migration research has noted that women are typically the primary actors to create and maintain immigrant networks in urban centers, suggesting the significance of gender in this realm [O'Connor 1990; Thorbek 1987; Ui 1991].

This paper situates itself within the theoretical tradition outlined above, directing attention to female-centered family networks among young factory women in northern Thailand. It illustrates the way in which social networks become a site in which migrant Thai women forge their own life paths whilst being integrated into the global economy in a rapidly industrializing part of the country. I also examine how these networks are sustained across the home and host communities, and how they acquire new meanings and significance in influencing a young woman's social standing. The aim of this paper is to illustrate that although northern Thai village society has been transformed by the expansion of global capitalism, family networks have retained their resiliency.

II Methods and Setting

The data used in this article are drawn from fieldwork conducted at the Northern Region Industrial Estate (NRIE) and an adjacent small village (Ban Sri Yuk)¹⁾ in Lamphun over a period of 13 months from June of 1997 to March of 2000. Additional visits were made in January and March of 2002. Semi-structured interviews with 60 single factory women living in apartments or dormitories were conducted at factories on weekdays and at their apartments and dormitories on weekends. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the interview questions, the informants were selected through personal networks. Information was solicited on the women's life history, social relationships, work and income, leisure activities, and health status. Participant observation and life histories were also used to gain a more richly textured understanding of the ideas and practices underlying family support over the lifespan. It should be noted, however, that this analysis does not intend to present a detailed web of social networks in diagram form, as is commonly done in sociology. Social networks in this article merely refer to webs of relationships among family members and friends.

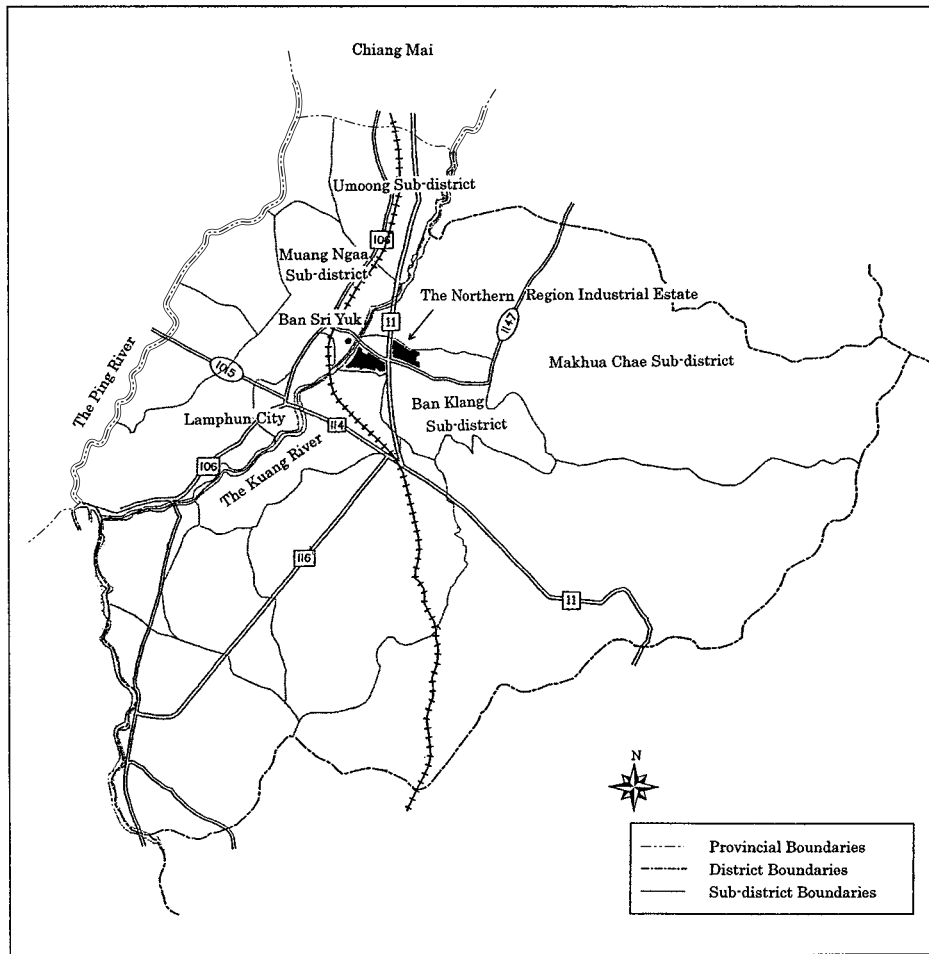
The NRIE is located in the Ban Klang and Makhua Chae sub-districts of Lamphun City in Lamphun Province. It stands on the right bank of the Kuang River, the major source of water in Lamphun City. The industrial park stretches east and west, away from the intersection of road no. 1147 and highway no. 11. The highway is a major road connecting Lamphun to Chiang Mai (Map 1).

Construction of the NRIE commenced in April 1983 and was completed in March 1985; by 1987 two factories had opened at the estate. Following continual efforts by the government to attract industrial development, the number of factories increased. In 1998, 62 factories had opened, another 13 factories were under preparation and 2 were under construction. Electronics factories represented 32.3% of the total factories within the NRIE and employed approximately 70% of the total work force [IEAT 1998].

The NRIE was developed in accordance with the governmental policy of decentralization in economic development. Facing a magnitude of social and environmental problems in Bangkok, the government planned to disperse development throughout Thailand. The sixth National Social Economic and Development Plan (1987–91) called for the distribution of development projects to other provinces outside the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, and subsequent plans strongly encouraged this trend [IEAT 1992: 9]. The first measure to be taken was to create industrial zones in various provinces and to attract foreign investment throughout the country. The establishment of the NRIE in the north generated job opportunities for young people in nearby villages, those from other parts of the northern region, as well as people from the northeastern and central regions of Thailand.

Table 1 summarizes the general characteristics of the 60 research informants, and Table 2 the primary occupations of their parents. While the vast majority of informants came to the

1) Pseudonym.



Map 1 Lamphun City

Source: Lamphun Provincial Office of City Planning 2002

estate from villages in the northern region of Thailand, two women came from the northeast. My analysis of the relationship between women and their families focuses on women from northern village families, because the data does not allow for regional comparisons. In terms of socio-economic status, the majority of the informants (39) came from farming families that owned small to medium-sized plots of land (around 10 to 20 *rai*²⁾). Four of the informants had come to work at the NRIE to pay off family debt, two of whom were teenagers (aged 18 and 19).

Using a land-based criterion developed by scholars to identify indigenous categories of wealth among northern Thai villagers, most informants were from families considered middle-

2) *Rai* is a unit used to measure land in Thailand. One *rai* is approximately 0.16 hectare.

Table 1 Profile of the 60 Research Informants

Characteristics	Informants (n=60)
Age (years)	
Under 20	11
20 to 24	28
25 to 29	19
Over 29	2
Median	23
Level of Education	
Primary school	3
Secondary school (9th grade)	22
Secondary school (12th grade)	23
Vocational school (2 years)	6
Vocational school (4 years)	4
University	1
No information	1
Working Status	
Group Leader	6
Operator	52
No information	2
Duration of Work at NRIE (years)	
Under 2	20
2 to 4	27
Over 4	13
Median	3
Region of Birth	
North	58
Northeast	2

Table 2 Primary Occupations of Informants' Parents

Occupations	(n=60)
Farmer	39
Trader/vendor/merchant	7
Wage laborer	6
Craftsperson	1
No information	7

class in their villages, while some were from poor families. The land-based criterion is based on a conventional three-tier model of agrarian differentiation developed and used by scholars such as Anan Ganjanapan, Paul Cohen and Andrew Turton [Gray 1990: 102–106].³⁾ Ganjanapan, Cohen, and Turton identified three tiers, or indigenous categories of wealth, among northern Thai villagers based principally on land ownership—the rich, the middle, and the poor [*loc. cit.*]. In this model, rich households are those that hold larger and more fertile land than do the others, and who rent out the land or employ agricultural laborers.

They may also have family members work in public offices or private companies, producing extra income. The typical middle class households are subsistence farmers, generally holding moderately-sized land which can support a family of approximately ten members or so. Some middle class households are landless, however, and utilize employment opportunities in the cities. The poor tend to have no access to land, often relying solely on irregular wages from agriculture or construction.

Since the mid-1980s, non-agricultural income has come to substantially supplement the total income of many northern Thai village agricultural households. Thus, scholars such as Turton have pointed to the need for a more new method for determining the economic status of agricultural households. Following the move from the classic three-tier model, Jennifer Gray, who conducted research on agrarian wealth differentiation in northern villages in the mid-1980s, found that land holding per se did not determine a household's economic status. Rather, status was associated with the total agricultural and non-agricultural income of all of the economically active members of the household [*ibid.*: 107–112]. She then constructed five

3) For a more in-depth discussion about this conventional model, see Jennifer Gray [1990: 102–106].

categories of relative wealth based on net disposable income.⁴⁾

The present study primarily used a land-based criterion. This was partly due to the fact that some informants were vague about the income and expenditure of their families and thus I am not able to use an income-based criterion for all informants. In interviews I found that a rough estimate of the annual agricultural income of a medium-sized landholder was 15,000 to 60,000 baht, but that this would vary depending on the year's weather conditions. In this study, the term, "marginally poor," is used for households that owned small plots of land and that earned less than 15,000 baht annually.

III Family Networks

III-1 *Family Composition*

Most informants came from two-parent households, and nine informants' households also included at least one grandparent. Two informants came from households with no parents, another two lacked a mother, and another five did not have a father. Twenty-six informants had at least one older sister, bringing the total number of older sisters to 42. Nine of the older sisters were engaged in farming, with the remaining working at the NRIE factories (4), engaged in trading (3), making dresses (3), working in department stores (2), working in the administrative section of a hotel (1), working as a domestic servant at Taiwan (1), among other professions. Twenty-six informants also had at least one younger sister, and the total number of younger sisters was 30. Seven of them worked in factories at the NRIE, and others were students (10), wage laborers (3), and so on. Twenty-one informants had at least one older brother, and the total number was 36. Thirteen of them were farmers or agricultural wage laborers, and others were factory workers at the NRIE (2) and Bangkok (1), general employees in private offices (2), a police officer (1), a monk (1), a truck driver (1), among other professions. Many of those who were married had left their natal home and stayed with their wives and children in their wife's village. Nineteen informants had at least one younger brother, and the total number was 30, eight of them being students and the rest factory workers at the NRIE (4), traders (2), general wage laborers (2), a farmer (1), a general employee in a private office (1), and so on.

III-2 *Cooperation with Families at Home*

III-2-1 *Remittance*

Forty-six out of the 60 factory women I interviewed remitted money to their rural families (Table 3). After extracting a base amount from their income, including money for the rent, food, and electricity, they allocated the rest of the money to remittances, personal consumption, and savings. Roughly speaking, the women earned 4,000 baht a month and they required

4) The net disposable income is arrived at by totaling on-farm income and off-farm income, and then subtracting the immediate costs of producing the on-farm income and the averaged food expenditure per year [Gray 1990: 107].

Table 3 Number of Informants Who Remit Money

Categories	(n=60)
Remit	46
Not remit	4
No information	10

Table 4 Monthly Expenses of Informants Who Remit Money

Categories	Expenses (baht)
(Basic expenses)	
Remittance	1,000–2,000
Rent	500–1,000
Food and necessities	1,000–1,500
(Special expenses)	
Motorcycle installment	1,000–1,500
Clothes and cosmetics	500–1,000

1,500 to 2,500 baht, or 40 to 60% of their income, for rent, food, and everyday expenses (Table 4).⁵⁾ Normally, the average remittance was between 1,000 to 2,000 baht per month. This amount fluctuated depending on the financial situation of their household, the woman's own needs, and the presence of other expenses, such as monthly installments for a motorcycle, a car, furniture, and other expensive items. For most of the informants, however, remittance to their rural households was the top priority each month. They would not divert even part of the remittance for personal commodities or their own enjoyment when they knew their rural families would run short of money. On the contrary, they reduced their personal consumption so as to increase the amount of the remittance whenever their parents needed a large sum of money.

Among the four women who did not remit money to their parents, two saved their money and the other two spent most of their income on monthly installments for a car, a motorcycle, and personal commodities instead. One of the women who saved her extra income did not need to send money since her family had a small parcel of land and a fruit orchard with which to support itself. She came to the NRIE to save money for her education. The other woman who saved had lost ties to her family and was all alone. Her father had passed away when she was 4 years old and her mother left her with her husband's mother when she remarried a man from another village. Her grandmother died of illness when she was 10 years old. Because she did not want to stay with her father's relatives, she left the village. The last two women did not have mothers and their fathers granted them autonomy after they graduated from high school. These four cases suggest that the factory women did not remit money to their rural households in cases where their families had other sources of income, or where they did not have a close relationship with their families. The loss of a parent, especially a mother, seems to weaken these ties. It should be noted that all of the women I interviewed who lost their fathers kept interdependent relationships with their mothers and remitted money regularly.

The actual contribution of the remittance to the household can be estimated by looking at a rough picture of the average household economy. Farm income fluctuated widely depending

5) Some earn more than 6,000 baht and others earn less than 3,000 baht. Incomes fluctuate along with the size and nationality of the company, as well with the worker's experience, job status, and educational background.

upon environmental factors such as rainfall and temperature, but a reasonable estimate of the annual income of a medium-sized landholder is 15,000 to 60,000 baht.⁶⁾ Similarly, petty commerce, wage labor, and craftwork yield meager income. In Ban Hong District of Lamphun, for instance, laborers earn approximately 150 baht per day working in a *lamyai* field of 25 *rai*. Skilled construction workers can earn from 180 to 200 baht per day, but those who do peripheral jobs, such as carrying sand and blocks, get less than 100 baht. Older laborers in their 50s and 60s do light jobs, such as peeling garlic, weaving cloth, and making fishing nets. Their wages are significantly lower, sometimes a mere 25 baht a day for peeling 10 kilograms of garlic. It can be inferred from these facts that factory women's remittances represent a reliable supplement to the rural household economy.⁷⁾

Families use the remittance from their daughters for everyday expenses, such as food, soap, and clothes, or for building a new house or renovating an old one. They also use the money for seasonal expenses or household emergencies. Seasonal expenses include those stemming from the harvest, transplanting, and tuition fees for younger siblings. Household emergencies include sudden illnesses, a bad harvest, and debt.

All of the informants stated that their families did not force them to work at the factories or to remit money, nor did they encourage them to stay at the NRIE or go to Bangkok to look for work. They stated that their families only asked for help when they had to pay off a debt or pay tuition for a younger sibling. Even then, they did not normally request money directly. Moreover, my informants emphasized their autonomy in managing their own money. The amount and the frequency of remittance were all left to their own discretion. However, if their parents do not force them to remit money, they do not refuse it, either. I encountered many cases in which parents expressed delight when their daughters handed over a purse, taking it without reserve.⁸⁾

III-2-2 *Support from the Family*

Forty-six informants who remitted money regularly considered their relationships with their families to be interdependent, stating that their family members also rendered help in many ways. Mothers provided them with immediate and direct assistance, such as making hand-woven blankets for them so that they could sleep comfortably at the dormitory even during the dry and cool season. In addition, mothers would frequently call their apartments to ask how they were getting on. Mothers would also bring fruit, peanuts, or vegetables to them. After their daughters gave birth, mothers became the primary caregivers of their working daughters'

6) Farmers in Lamphun and in nearby northern provinces primarily grow rice, garlic, green onions, green peas, and *lamyai* (longan, one of the primary agricultural products of Lamphun).

7) The significance of the monetary contributions made by young daughters has been consistently noted in the literature on northern Thai women and their families, although the actual amount of contribution differs depending on the financial situation of the families [Gray 1990; Hirai 1995; Muecke 1992].

8) They never send money by mail. Instead, they hand the money to their parents when they visit or ask their friends to bring the money to them when they cannot return in person.

babies. Other family members, including fathers, brothers, younger sisters, and extended family (grandparents, uncles, and aunts), also cared for the factory women; but the quality of care from mothers differed greatly from that of other family members, for the latter primarily provided them with only emotional support.

Older sisters were the second most important family members for my informants. While most older sisters were engaged in farming in their natal villages, those who worked or used to work outside helped contribute financially to the household and the education of younger siblings, including my informants.

Besides providing tuition assistance, older sisters often became good caregivers and counselors to my informants. One 21-year-old woman, in bad health since coming to work at the NRIE, said that her older sister, a 29-year-old employee at a private office in Chiang Mai, always took care of her when she was sick.⁹⁾ She recalled one time in particular when she had a severe cough and fever and hospitalized overnight at Haripunchai Hospital.¹⁰⁾ She was given an intravenous drip and her sister tended to her throughout the night.

Older sisters are particularly good counselors on issues related to sexual and reproductive health and dating. Although nearly half of my informants stated that they would consult with close friends, often married female friends, about sexual and reproductive health issues, the rest of the informants stated that they still depended on their family members, especially mother and older sisters, when problems arose. They considered it inappropriate to ask friends with whom they were not very close about sexual matters and instead felt more comfortable consulting with female family members or childhood friends. One factory woman told me that her older sister always took her to festivals, such as *loi krathong*, and taught her about contraception on the way.

My informants not only received support but also helped out their older sisters when possible. For example, if an older sister was raising children at home, a portion of the factory woman's remittance could be allocated for milk or clothes for the children. A 26-year-old factory woman, who worked for a Japanese electronics company and received approximately 6,000 to 7,000 baht a month, remitted about 4,000 baht a month to her family, which covered their daily expenses and the cost of raising her sister's baby. The remittance meant a lot to her sister, who was a dressmaker and earned too little to pay for a monthly supply of dried milk.¹¹⁾

9) Data from annual health checks and health records taken by the nurses at a medical office in a Japanese factory listed both major and minor diseases, including HIV, hepatitis B, fever, backache, headache, stomachache, eczema, sore eyes, sore throat, constipation, and so on.

10) Haripunchai Hospital is a private hospital located next to the NRIE. It provides various health care services for factory workers and people living in the surrounding area.

11) In northern rural villages, it is common for small children to take baby formula for up to three years, after being breast-fed for a year or so. It is said to supplement the nutrition obtained from ordinary food.

III-3 *Cooperation between Family Members at the NRIE*

Factory women's support networks expanded as they entered the NRIE with their sisters and brothers. In total, 11 informants had female siblings and 6 had male siblings at the NRIE. All except one of the 11 maintained good relationships with their sisters, sharing living expenses, helping each other find jobs, and pooling their income to buy relatively expensive goods, such as furniture and motorcycles. On the other hand, only one of the six women who had brothers working at the NRIE rented a room in the same apartment in which her brother lived, and the remaining women lived separately from their brothers. While the six women maintained ties with their brothers at the NRIE and did receive some support from them (such as carrying luggage and furniture to a new apartment or driving back to their home villages together), the collaboration between my female informants and their male siblings was less perceptible. In addition, the male siblings' relationships with each other did not include the same kind of economic support that the female siblings' relationships did. These brothers did not share living expenses, pool money, or remit money together with other siblings. The management of their income was completely independent.

The male siblings did contribute to their rural household's economy, unless they were still in school or had married and lived with their wives' families. Informal interviews with some of these men suggested that those who stayed at home helped their parents' farm, and those who had formal employment in the city remitted money. Additional open-ended interviews with 27 factory men conducted during the final phase of this research project also revealed that 17 of them, including both single and married men, remitted approximately 1,000 baht a month regularly to their parents [Michinobu 2001]. Some of them asked their parents or their wives' parents to take care of their small children, and in that case they remitted about 2,000 baht. Ten men did not remit any money regularly. The major reason was lack of income, as those who worked for only a few months were generally unable to remit.

At the NRIE, female siblings' solidarity was more perceptible than that among male siblings or among female and male siblings. This could be partially due to the fact that the overall number of male workers at the NRIE is smaller than that of female workers, making collaborative work with male siblings less apparent. There are more job openings for women than for men in factories at NRIE, making it harder for young men to earn enough to contribute to their rural households.

In order to illustrate the quality and depth of some of the female sibling collaboration at the NRIE, I will present three case studies. The first two serve as positive examples, in which female siblings worked together to substantially improve the well being of the family, while the third serves as a negative example in which the siblings fought constantly and one of them eventually returned home.¹²⁾

12) The selection of these three cases is based upon the depth and richness of the data. They are not intended as a generalized picture of female sibling ties; rather, I aim to show how dynamic such relationships are.

A) *Sendaw, Noi and Yin*

Sendaw, Noi and Yin are 27, 24 and 22 years old, respectively. They were from a marginally poor household in a small farming village in Chiang Mai. After finishing the 9th grade and helping her parents in the rice fields for a while, Sendaw came to work at the NRIE in 1990 in order to help contribute to her younger sisters' school fees. She worked for a Japanese electronics company until 1995, and later began managing a small dressmaking shop in Ban Sri Yuk. Due to their older sister's diligence, both Noi and Yin were able to finish the 12th grade. In 1996, Noi got a job at the electronics company where Sendaw had previously worked. The sisters also had three older brothers who had married and established households with their spouses' families in other villages. The brothers were subsistence farmers, although the eldest brother kept a chicken farm as well.

The siblings' parents had been farmers and used to work a small rice field, but they had given up farming several years earlier. Their mother now stayed at home and their father earned spare money by peeling garlic everyday. The family had once suffered such extreme poverty that they could not afford proper food or shelter. Whenever a heavy rainfall lasted through the night, the rain would drip into the house through holes in the thatched roof. During the dry and cool seasons the family often shivered in the rugged house, lacking adequate clothes to cover their bodies. On such days, their father would collect whatever clothes he had in the house and would even take off his own shirt in order to give it to his children. Their parents would call everybody to huddle close together, holding the children close to protect them from the cold wind blowing through the house.

Having suffered such hardship and struggled to obtain such basic necessities as food, clothing, and shelter, the three sisters were determined to find a more stable source of income. They helped each other get secondary educations, believing that their chances of getting decent jobs with good salaries would increase if they did so.¹³⁾ Sendaw had the hardest time since she had to earn her own tuition while helping Noi and Yin with their education. Her life improved after Noi and Yin came to work at the NRIE and shared responsibility for the household economy.

Being the most ambitious of all the daughters, Noi had hoped to study business management at a university and run a business in her hometown in the future. Knowing that Sendaw could not afford to pay her tuition for another four years, however, Noi decided to leave school after 12th grade in order to support the household economy first before continuing her own education. She worked as an operator on a production line for five years and was promoted to chief of the education section, a remarkable achievement for a factory woman with her level of education and only made possible by her diligence. She then enrolled in a correspondence university, majoring in business management. In 2002, she also attended English language classes arranged specifically for select people in low to mid-level management who were recommended by their bosses. In 1998, Yin married a factory man from Phicit, and

13) Young women with a primary school education tended to remain in the village as farmers, while those with secondary school or higher education tended to take jobs outside of the village.

in 2000 Yin and her husband moved back to Chiang Mai to live with her parents. Her parents had asked if one of their daughters would move home in order to keep them company, and to care for them and their 76-year-old grandmother.

Ever since then, Noi has sent a monthly remittance of approximately 2,000 to 3,000 baht, while Sendaw provided Noi with food and shelter. Yin also assisted with food and necessities for her parents and grandmother. The three sisters have also built a new two-story house made of beautifully carved wood for their parents. In addition, they have furnished the house with luxurious items such as a television set, a telephone, a radio, sofas, dressers, and so on. According to the sisters, these were all necessities for the type of comfortable lifestyle their parents and grandmother deserved.

In 2001, Yin gave a birth to a daughter. When I visited them, their mother seemed elated, holding her granddaughter in her arms. Having once suffered from poverty, she seemed to have found comfort and happiness in her three daughters and little granddaughter.

B) *Phan and Fai*

Phan and Fai are 31 years old and 28 years old, respectively. They are sisters who work for Japanese electronics companies at the NRIE. In 1997, they lived in a rented house in Ban Sri Yuk with three other female employees. All five came from a small village situated at the foot of a mountain in Mae Hong Son province, where their families earned a living through subsistence farming. Neither the village nor the city of Mae Hong Son, approximately 60 kilometers away from the village, provided many employment opportunities for young people except for agricultural wage labor. It was common for young people in this village to migrate to Chiang Mai or Bangkok to find work.

Phan and Fai's family included their parents and three brothers, aged 25, 22, and 19. The family was marginally poor and suffered when Phan and Fai were children because their parents had to live from hand to mouth tending a small field. Both Phan and Fai attended primary school in their hometown but they had to leave home to support themselves as soon as they finished their primary education. Phan and Fai worked at several different places before coming to the NRIE—a noodle shop and an automobile shop owned by their aunts in Mae Hong Son, a dressmaking shop in Lampang, and a private nursery and a general shop owned by their relatives in Chiang Mai—while receiving a high school education at an adult school. Meanwhile, their eldest brother completed the 12th grade and got a job at the NRIE. In 1995, Phan and Fai followed the eldest brother to the NRIE.

Since Phan and Fai came to the NRIE, they have been sending what little money they earn to their family. In 1997, they sent a combined total of approximately 5,000 baht to their two younger brothers who were still in school and 3,000 baht to their parents. That was over 50% of the total income of 14,000 baht that they earned by working overtime almost every day and taking only a few holidays a month. In 1998, the middle brother completed higher education at a private university in Bangkok and found a job in the general affairs section of a private company in Raatburii province, south of Bangkok. In 2000, the youngest brother also finished

two years of education at a vocational college and moved to Lamphun to find a job. Meanwhile, the eldest brother married and left the NRIE for his wife's village in Naan province, where he opened a barbershop with his wife.

Phan and Fai's parents were proud of their hardworking daughters. As a symbol of their pride in their daughters, they kept a series of official notifications and certificates of merit awarded by their daughters' companies carefully framed and hung on the wall of their living room. Everyone who visited their house would notice them and ask their parents to talk about their daughters. After the youngest brother finished school, the sisters were able to allocate even more money to their parents, purchasing new furniture and renovating the house with beautifully carved wood, which they bought piece by piece over the course of several years.

In 2002, Phan and Fai still worked for the same companies, but lived in a different place. They had bought a brand new three-story commercial building for 800,000 baht in a business area in front of the NRIE. They lived in this building with their mother and eldest brother, who moved from Naan with his wife and 3-year-old son and opened a barbershop and a mobile phone shop in Ban Sri Yuk. Back at home their father oversaw the newly renovated house. Fai and Phan worked in the factories almost every day and ran a shop selling miscellaneous goods on the first floor of the building, so as to make the monthly installments on the building (10,000 baht a month). Their mother and their brother's wife helped run the shop, and their eldest brother helped them pay the installments.

Fai had once sworn that she would return to Mae Hong Son to open a shop like her aunt. She seemed to have revised her dream: instead, she had opened a shop near the NRIE and invited her family members to come live with her. By owning a shop near the NRIE and asking her family to take care of the shop, she and her older sister are able to keep working in the factories while garnering additional income from their side business. The income from factory work was still necessary for them to make the payments and to raise the family's financial status. This salmon-pink building seemed to be a symbol of the fruits of the collective work of the two sisters and their family members.

C) *Daw and Mari*

Daw is an 18-year-old factory woman who has been working for a Japanese electronics company for two years. She has a 16-year-old sister, Mari, who also worked for the same company. They rented a room at an apartment near the NRIE. One month earlier her younger sister left the apartment for their home in Lii district of Lamphun, leaving only a note behind. In it she said that she was bored with working and could not bear it anymore. Daw was surprised at the note and called her mother at home. Only her mother and 60-year-old grandmother lived at home and both of them were unhappy to see her sister return. They had a debt from a farmer's cooperative bank loan worth approximately 20,000 baht and remittance from the two daughters was the only resource they could rely upon. The mother spoke with Mari, but Mari stubbornly refused to return to the NRIE.

The economic situation of the family had been shaky ever since the girls' father died when

Daw was 12 years old. She lamented, “We live from hand to mouth each day. I am worried about the terms of payment for the farmer’s cooperative bank. The bill will come next month and this time I will have to pay 10,000 baht.” Her monthly wages were about 4,000 baht and not much money was left after extracting expenditures for her daily living, the rent on her room, and monthly installments for a motorcycle. She saved only about 500 to 1,000 baht a month for her mother.

Daw and Mari did not get along well when they lived together at the NRIE. They quarreled with each other whenever problems arose at work or in their family. Daw’s close friend, who used to work in the same factory, listened to her problems and helped her financially. Peer support became an important complement to family support when the factory women experienced problems that they could not discuss with family members. At the NRIE, women who have known each other from childhood often form pseudo-family relationships. Although they get along with a variety of people, they do not become close with all of them. In many cases, the only people they truly trust are friends from childhood. They seem to feel safest with people whose family backgrounds are familiar, which in turn sustains their ties to their home villages.

In the case of Daw and Mari, the conflict did not alienate the two siblings from their family. Mari went back home and stayed with her mother even though she was scolded for evading her responsibilities. Everyone knew that she had nowhere to go and could not make a living by herself. Similarly, Daw did not intend to become independent, freed from family responsibilities, even though family ties seemed to weigh heavily upon her. Daw understood that she had to maintain ties with her family since they were heavily dependent on her, but that some day the family would be able to help her.

Factory work was full of risks, including illness and lay-offs. Both mental and physical fatigue were common among the workers, since factory work is intense. They could earn good money by working overtime in the evenings and on weekends, but overtime work often resulted in chronic headaches, or pain in the hands, legs, or stomach. Workers could minimize risk and maximize opportunity by turning to sisters and friends, and also by receiving emotional support from their parents back in the rural villages. But if their health failed they had no other choice but to return to their hometowns.

IV Meanings of Family Networks

The young factory women’s practices of maintaining interdependent relationships with their family members are grounded in the gender norms of northern Thai village society, which are in turn based on northern Thai village social systems. Sulamith Potter has identified matrilineal ancestral spirit cults as an important basis for northern Thai village social systems, in which women retain some degree of autonomy and form strong support networks with female kin [Potter 1977]. Matrilineal ancestral spirit cults serve as a symbolic means of indicating alliance with female kin and function to accord women a certain level of social

autonomy and power within both the kin group and the community as the primary caretakers of the spirits. Yet the cults also serve to control young women's social behavior. Parents teach their daughters to pay respect and express gratitude to them by participating in household work or sharing their wages [Muecke 1992]. The parental teaching is grounded in a belief that one of the most offensive acts to the spirits is for young daughters to be negligent in caring for their parents in old age.

Young women in northern Thai villages forge a positive self-identity by conforming to the gender norms [Hirai 1998; Muecke 1992; Potter 1977]. Identity is formed in the context of being someone's daughter, sister, wife, or mother, and a sense of self independent of family role is much less salient than in the West. Family members also assess the value of a young woman in terms of her actual contribution to the household [Hirai 1998; Muecke 1992]. This encourages women to work enthusiastically for their parents and younger siblings and sacrifice their own desires. Thus, young village women's labor migration to the NRIE is one form of fulfilling their social obligations, which are rooted in northern Thai village social systems.

My informants did complain about their social obligations and the fact that they had to suppress their own desires. Yin, for instance, frequently said that she was bored with living with her parents and grandmother and wished to establish an independent household with her husband and daughter. Although in northern villages the main house is often inherited by the youngest daughter, some informants said that anyone can inherit it and become the primary caretaker of their aging parents. The tendency, however, is for elder siblings to marry and leave the household first, leaving the youngest no other choice but to remain at the house. Daw also said she was unhappy working at the NRIE as she was overwhelmed by the long hours and repetitive work at factory. She said that if she had no obligations to her family, she would quit work and go back to school.

Although these young women feel varying levels of dissatisfaction with their situation, they also understand that factory work is one of their obligations and that it will benefit them in the long run. Daw said, "I wish to leave here by next year. But, I have to stay here for the future of my family. I have to pay the debt. I have to build a new house." Similarly, a 25-year-old factory woman said, "My ideas and behavior follow the teachings of my parents. I came to work here for my parents." A 19-year-old factory woman also said, "I was very lonely at first, but I'm fine right now. I know that I will never be alone as I work for my parents." They believe that once their sacrificial efforts bear fruit, they will share a better future with their families, and their younger siblings will take over their duties in turn. For example, a 22-year-old woman who worked at the NRIE for three years to support her younger sister's education said that she would ask her sister come to work at the NRIE when she finished her education.

Mills [1993; 1997; 1999] and Hirai [1995; 2001] depict Thai factory women alternating their behavior across time and space, from being "up-to-date" women wearing fashionable clothes and flocking to entertainment places, to being "conventional" women remitting money and decorating their parents' houses with luxurious items. They suggest that young factory women have to manage conflicting desires to be modern and conventional. On the contrary, many

women in my study relied on their stable family networks to continue to work at the NRIE, elevate their work status within the factory, and earn enough money to spend on fashionable clothes and entertainment activities. On the other hand, if they were overwhelmed with family problems, such as debt and illness, they refrained from spending large sums on shopping, dining and drinking. In my study, four women from indebted families mentioned that they could not afford to buy cosmetics or to go out for a drink. One of them said, “Those who can afford it would go out to have a fun. Those who have to support their families would not.” Another also said, “I go shopping only when it is affordable. Sharing living costs with my sister and working extra hours rarely gives me such an opportunity.” This suggests that novel behavior, including urban consumption and social outings, does not stand in opposition to village-based behavior, such as remittance and sibling cooperation. Rather, using cosmetics and wearing up-to-date clothes, for those who can afford it, is a practice situated within the overall practice of upgrading the self. Upgrading the self, in turn, is not viewed in isolation from contributing to the household economy or to their family’s consistent and stable support for their engagement in factory work.

Solidarity with other family members suggests more than the continuity of the aforementioned female collaboration in rural northern villages. It is a practice by which young female workers affirm the preeminence of village social relationships over those at the NRIE. Many informants retained an idealized image of village social relationships in which people are compassionate and caring. This is then contrasted to the mistrustful and conflicting social relations among friends and colleagues at the NRIE. The experience of tension and uneasiness, coupled with the hardship and boredom at the factory, leads them to reaffirm village society as a place to which they eventually wish to return. Family support networks take on a new meaning at the NRIE, as they symbolize the ideal social relationships in village communities.

Moreover, some informants make use of the family networks to actively restore their good image. At the NRIE, premarital sexual relations among young factory workers were widely observed and villagers living nearby the NRIE often criticized young factory women for breaking conventional sexual norms of premarital chastity [Michinobu 2000]. Factory women at the NRIE were called as *sao nikhom*, literally meaning young single women at an industrial park but actually having the connotation of sexually adventurous women. They were also called as *kai long*. *Kai* means chicken, and *long* the state of being astray; thus, it literally means, *lost chickens*. In Thai society, this term is often used to describe women who frequent entertainment spots, such as discotheques, and readily have sex with strangers. Sometimes they provide sex for money like freelance prostitutes. The villagers thought that being far away from their parents made factory women more likely to engage in careless sex. On the other hand, many of my informants who actually engaged in intimate relationships resisted such negative images of sexual depravity perpetuated by villagers, and tried to uphold their image as “good women” according to northern village standards. Some did this by emphasizing the fact that their sexual relationships had parental approval, or by showing that their social behavior

was still guarded by their family members so as not to spin out of control. In northern Thai villages, parental approval of a young couple's sexual relationship serves as a guarantee for their future marriage and thus functions to give public legitimacy to their premarital sex. Many women at the NRIE preferred postponing marriage in order to first improve the financial status of their families, and also to save money for their wedding ceremony and the necessities of married life. Parents are well aware of their daughters' financial constraints and tend to condone their premarital sexual relationships.

Some of my informants, on the other hand, kept their premarital sexual relations a secret. Although they were fully aware that they would be the targets of gossip by their colleagues or dorm mates as well as disgracing their parents, they hesitated to make their sexual relations public. These women worked hard to maintain their honor while managing the various cultural expectations placed on young women in their home and host communities. The quote of a 25-year-old informant, who had secret premarital sexual relations with a factory man, illustrates this point:

I had a boyfriend. I got along with him for five years, and it was two years ago that I broke up with him. I didn't tell my parents about him. Only some of my close friends knew about it. I never thought that I was a bad girl, because I intended to marry him. I was sure I would marry for romantic love. People often said that women who have sex before marriage are bad. I think it is unfair for women (to be judged solely by the status of their virginity). I kept working for my parents and younger brother, and did nothing to bring shame on them. A new house is under construction and my brother will soon finish his education. I have never been a bad daughter for my family.

This young woman tried hard to uphold her good image by referring to her sincere commitment to her ex-boyfriend and the primacy of family relations in her life at the NRIE.

V Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that factory women working at the NRIE maintain female-centered family networks, and that these women are able to forge positive self-identities through interdependent relationships with their families even though they are away from home. The practice of sending money back to their rural households and investing in the housing and education of younger siblings is based on village norms that honor women who work hard to maintain or improve the well-being of their families and the prosperity of the household. The practice therefore can be viewed as an active strategy to gain honor among families and rural communities and to present themselves as good women in northern villages.

The practice of maintaining family ties and playing the role of good daughters in the family relationships acquired another kind of significance at the NRIE, as it enabled factory women to defy the negative imagery of factory women as sexually loose and maintain their honor. Engaging in premarital sexual relations or cohabitating actually conflicted with village

gender norms; yet for factory women it did not get in the way of maintaining strong family ties. For some women, premarital sexual relations were approved by their families as preludes to marriage. For other women, their honor was not judged by premarital virginity alone. Rather, maintaining the daughterly roles that had been articulated in their home villages within the NRIE community became strong proof of being a good woman.

Even after decades of integration into a global capitalist economy, the ideals of collaboration and assistance remain strong in village households. Scholars who have studied the transformation of young woman's lives in northern Thai villages have shown that communal work has decreased and ancestral spirit cults have disappeared as increasing numbers of young people have found employment outside of the villages [Gray 1990; Varunee and Benja 1994]. Nonetheless, the ideal of mutual assistance had not disappeared so quickly among young women in my study, for they regarded the family network as a source of social support and a space in which they could find positive identities.

Contrary to the situation predicted by macro-approaches in migration—such as modernization theory and dependent theory—economic development and the massive exodus of rural youth to urban centers in Asian countries has not resulted in a failure of social ties or the decline of village-based social norms. Migration research in Asian countries has continued to demonstrate the continuity of rural kinship ties that articulate villages with cities [Guinness 1993; Pasuk 1982; Thorbek 1987; Ong 1987; Wolf 1992]. The present study contributes to such research by illustrating the sustainability of such ties.

Social network analysis in this study had to focus exclusively on the family, because factory women in this setting formed the strongest bonds with their close kin.¹⁴⁾ Interestingly, the continuity of rural kin networks seemed to exist without much reference to changes in the village community itself. In their home villages, the value of equality and communal assistance among villagers seemed to have decreased as some villagers acquired substantial benefits by having children who went to work in cities, while others did not.

Factory women's self-identity is multifaceted; various factors influence its development. Such factors include encounters with images of "modern women" in mass media, experiences of moving away from home and participating in a culture of consumption, cultural expectations about what it means to be a good woman in northern Thai villages, observations of reciprocal relationships among family members, and gossip from those around the estate about the sexual behavior of factory women. Their identity is thus both up-to-date and conventional, consisting of intermingled elements rather than consisting of separate presentations that vary according to context. For factory women, for example, being sexually active did not contradict being dutiful to their families.

Many of the previous studies on young, migrant Thai women in cities or other industrial areas have consistently pointed to the emergence of "up-to-date" gender identities among these young women. These studies have maintained that young women's participation in wage

14) Factory women sometimes formed pseudo-family relations with old friends in their home villages.

employment, urban consumption and social outings—all considered practices of modernity—have generated unconventional identities valuing self-assertion, sexual attractiveness, and urban sophistication [Gray 1990; Hirai 1995; 1998; 2001; Mills 1993; 1997; 1999]. Analyses of novel practices and emergent identities of young migrant women in cities are, of course, crucial to examining the locally contextualized meanings of modernity. On the other hand, an overemphasis on the novel ideas and behavior adopted by young women upon moving to the cities can obscure the fact that in many cases these women are still in close contact with their natal households and continue to define themselves in relation to their families. The values and behaviors of their family life in the villages are thus maintained, modified or reworked in the factory women's new surroundings. By demonstrating that family networks are still the primary social networks for the majority of the women in the study, this paper illuminates the way that family ties become a loose thread weaving together the multifaceted selves of northern Thai factory women.

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