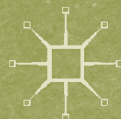# LOVE AND INTIMACY IN ONLINE CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

WILASINEE
PANANAKHONSAB

Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family
and Intimate Life

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The Power of Imagination

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Introduction

The journey of this book started with my close friend, Chan.[1] In the past, I had quite strong prejudices against online intimate relationships. I believed that only those people with difficulties in making relationships work in real life would turn to online dating sites in the hope of finding a spouse. Then, my friend Chan married a German man, John, whom she had met through an intermarriage dating site. Chan had joined the site and had maintained her membership somewhat sporadically for over a year. She paid for gold membership in order to access extra services and send some initial contacts to Western men whom she considered attractive.

Chan found John's profile through the site's matching system after she had been a member for a year. She initiated contact by leaving a short message on his profile. After John replied, they started chatting to each other for a while via the site, and then they changed to communicating through e-mail and Skype. They talked online for four months before their first meeting in person. John went to Thailand for a month's holiday, which he spent with Chan and her family in her hometown. After that, he returned to his own country, Germany, and maintained contact with her through various channels, including Skype, e-mails, and phone. When he revisited Thailand, seven months after his first visit, they decided to get married. Chan told me that she had found her perfect man. John worked as an engineer in Germany and they were of a similar age. After their marriage, they took turns going back and forth to see each other until Chan became pregnant. She then decided to resign from her job in Thailand and moved to live with John in Germany.

Chan's experiences led me to question my bias against intermarriage dating sites. Before I decided to pursue this research project, I had never turned to cyberspace to search for a partner, nor had anyone in my network of kin. I was relatively unfamiliar with the processes of online dating. I felt certain that online relationships were shallow and impossible to conduct offline, especially where cross-cultural and/or long-distance relationships were concerned. It appeared to me that these relationships tended to lack credibility and would only be pursued by shy, lonely individuals, who were possibly only interested in cybersex. Thus, when Chan first told me that she used an intermarriage dating site to find her prospective spouse, I was surprised. Chan did not fit my stereotype of people who pursued relationships online. She was a friendly, pleasant woman who enjoyed being with other people. At the same time, Chan did not fit the stereotypes of Thai women who sought Western men for reasons of economic mobility. Chan had finished her Bachelor's degree at a prestigious public university in Thailand as well as a short training course in the USA to support her career. She was a well-educated professional in Thailand with a high income. Why would women like Chan turn to an intermarriage dating site to find a Western spouse if such a relationship was not to escape poverty? Were there other reasons behind her decision to use intermarriage dating sites to pursue cross-cultural relationships online?

Interestingly, in the first stage of her online relationship, my own stereotypes about intermarriage dating sites partly affected Chan's behavior when she interacted with John. When I heard negative stories about women who became holiday girlfriends or victims of online romance scams, I would always tell her. At times, this made her hesitant to maintain contact with him. Nevertheless, after two months of consistently exchanging messages, chats, and thoughts with John in the virtual world, Chan felt totally committed to him. She decided to switch off her profile on the intermarriage dating site. She always called John *fan chan* (my boyfriend) when we talked on phone or in person. I was astonished that she believed in their "chemistry" without any sensory input generated from actual physical contact. It seemed to me that it would not be easy to transform the ties of an online relationship into something "real". Furthermore, Chan and John's relationship was not only taking place online, but it was also long-distance and cross-cultural. I found it difficult to believe that she had a "real" boyfriend until she met him in person and then married him ten days after he arrived for his second visit. Chan's story left me questioning why Thai women use intermarriage dating sites to find love and

marriage. How do romantic love and intimacy unfold online and how is this dynamic interpreted by people from different cultural backgrounds? How are relationships initiated and developed from online to offline contexts? How do cross-cultural couples maintain their relationships across distance and time?

What I learned from Chan's experience is that cyberspace has become an important medium for initiating, developing, and maintaining love and intimacy between people from different parts of the world. Cyberspace is a part of reality and therefore should not be viewed as diametrically opposed to actual space (Ben-Ze'ev 2004). The people who engage in cross-cultural relationships online are real people who may have specific imaginings and desires that are not being fulfilled in offline contexts. As discussed in Chap. 2, women might also sometimes feel embarrassed to list themselves on intermarriage dating sites and seek love in cyberspace. However, there are several key factors at play here that motivate these women to pursue cross-cultural relationships online. Of particular importance are women's romantic aspirations to marry and the limitations of the local marriage market. Also crucial is their imagining of Western men as romantic and modern.

Furthermore, the story of Chan underlines the fact that the women who participate in intermarriage dating sites to search for prospective partners are not solely seeking to migrate nor to enhance their economic status as a result of poverty. Rather, a range of reasons informs decisions made by these middle-class, well-educated women to become involved in intermarriage dating websites. Chan did not turn to intermarriage dating sites due to economic pressure, or a desire to migrate overseas. In this way, Chan's story challenges popular images of women on intermarriage dating sites. When women from economically poorer countries or regions advertise their desire to marry someone from wealthier locations, their motivation is frequently reduced to distorted stories about immigration fraud and the commodification of women from developing countries (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Hochschild 2003; Wang and Chang 2002). The term "mail-order brides" is often employed to describe how these women subscribe to popular images of their own subservience and marry out of economic desperation. Women in international marriages are commonly viewed through the extremely dualistic images of a "sexual-romantic oriental doll" and/or as a "conniving and shrewd lady" (Constable 2003, 13).

As a sexual-romantic oriental doll, Asian women are likely to be perceived as examples of "exotic love" or the "desirable Other". Angeles and

Sunanta (2007) argue that Asian women are often featured in catalogues intended for Western men, who then select and "purchase" them with a view to marriage. In targeting those men searching for intimate relationships, the women are arguably advertised as more submissive and making more feminine, traditional wives while simultaneously representing the Other of modern Western women. This representation as the Other appeases these men, who tend to view modern, Western women as too aggressive, demanding, and liberal. In this context, Western men remain the active viewer or potential consumer, whereas the Asian women are seen as passive, eroticized, and sexual objects to be looked at and desired.

In constructions of conniving and shrewd females, Asian women are portrayed as manipulative and calculating, ready to take advantage of Western men of a higher economic standing as a means to better their own lives (Constable 2003). Marriage migration is often seen as a strategy for such women to extricate themselves from poverty. In some cases, economic difficulties in developing countries may push women to engage in immigration fraud because of both the high cost of international migration and the more heavily restrictive immigration policies in Western countries. Marrying a man who resides in a well-developed nation might well be the best option through which these women can achieve their desired destinations (Fan and Huang 1998).

The majority of research on cyberspace and cross-cultural relationships has remained focused on so-called "mail-order brides". Many studies have pointed to newly intensified patterns of commodification and sexualization of women in cyberspace (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Lee 1998; Lloyd 2000; Zabyelina 2009). For example, Angeles and Sunanta (2007) examine the role of intermarriage websites and cyberspace in constructing Asian women as marketable objects. Their study argues that the mail-order bride business uses cyberspace as an innovative tool to disseminate its services. The interactive nature of digital media makes the process of choosing easy and convenient for Western men. Zabyelina (2009) explores the development of the mail-order-bride industry and the impact of information and communication technology on its expansion. Her study demonstrates that mail-order bride services can be found in abundance on the Internet, where the brides featured in the catalogues clearly tend to be oriented toward pleasing male consumers. The entire industry is based on recruiting women who are ready to fulfil Western men's expectations and requests.

Although these studies contribute to an analysis of gender and sexuality within cyberspace, they do not capture the responses of the women

themselves to the social and cultural changes that occur as a consequence of technological innovations. Their explanations reflect only one side of the intermarriage websites: those in which women do not directly contact Western men on their own behalf. Instead, each stage of the relationship is arranged by the agency. As discussed in Chap. 3, the scope of services between intermarriage agency websites and intermarriage dating services is dramatically different. While intermarriage dating *agencies* provide a wide range of services such as creating women's online profiles, translating communications, and arranging trips to introduce foreign men to local women, intermarriage dating *sites* provide only the matching systems and the communication tools to make meeting over the Internet easier. They do not offer any services to assist customers in meeting their prospective spouses.

Thus, there are significant differences between Thai women who engage in the two different types of intermarriage websites. Intermarriage dating *sites* often involve better-educated, higher-class Thai women who possess more power in negotiating with their prospective Western partners and who seek to strike a balance between economic considerations and love/intimacy. In contrast, the agency-managed intermarriage pursuit typically involves less educated, lower-class Thai women who lack power in negotiating with Western men and who tend to place economic considerations before love/intimacy. These distinctions between the "agency-managed" and the "self-managed" pursuit of cross-cultural relationships in turn raise questions about women's agency and expressions of love and intimacy in cyberspace that have been largely neglected in these studies.

Some more nuanced details about cross-cultural relationships in cyberspace can be found in Constable's (2003) study, which explores a number of underlying motivations of Filipina and Chinese women, and the occasional American man, for wanting to enter into cross-cultural relationships. Her research finds evidence of individuals falling intensely in love once they enter into a long-standing exchange. Constable infers that although women's decisions to correspond with and marry a foreigner are often shaped by their personal situation as well as by their ideas about life in the USA, other emotional and personal factors—such as love, attraction, chemistry, respect, and practical and individual considerations—are also important motivators. Moreover, instead of assuming that these women are passive, exploited victims, Constable aims to stress their agency as evidenced by their decision-making about who to correspond with, whether to continue that correspondence, and/or whom to meet and marry.

However, Constable's primary focus is on the motivational forces that guide human yearning for intimacy and on women's agency in choosing their prospective partners. Her study lacks attention to other features in the process of developing cross-cultural relationships, both in online and offline contexts. What is missing, for example, is a consideration of the construction of love and intimacy in online contexts, the maintenance of relationships across distance, and the significance of technology in terms of transforming emotions and imagination.

My research addresses this gap by exploring the process of developing cross-cultural relationships through the experiences of 24 Thai women who have turned to intermarriage dating sites to search for Western partners. It primarily focuses on how love and intimacy between Thai women and Western men are constructed, developed, and maintained across contexts (from online to offline, and from offline to online), across distance (involving different parts of the world), across time (over the duration of the relationships), and across culture (between people belonging to different ethnic and cultural backgrounds).

This book employs the term "cross-cultural relationships" to refer to relationships between Thai women and Western men. This is for two reasons. First, although many terms—such as cross-cultural relationships, cross-border relationships, and transnational relationships—can be used to describe international relationships,[2] the primary emphasis within each of these terms is in fact different. For example, the term "cross-border relationships" focuses on geographical, national, racial, class, gender, and cultural borders constructed in the hosting societies, while the term "transnational relationships" emphasizes transnational networks and spaces created by the actors themselves (Lu and Yang 2010, 25). However, both terms can be used to refer to cross-cultural relationships as well as same-culture relationships. For example, Thai (2005) examines marriages between second-generation Vietnamese-American men and Vietnamese women via arranged marriages as one type of cross-border relationship, which involves intra-ethnic marriages between individuals of the same ethnic or religious background. This phenomenon constitutes a form of "endogamy", whereby there is a marked preference among native-born individuals for marriage partners from their own ethnic or religious groups in the other countries (Tseng 2010). Thus, some cross-border and transnational relationships are not necessarily cross-cultural relationships. Second, this study does not examine women's experiences of their marriages or of the transition from being long-distance couples to being

geographically proximate couples. Rather, it explores women's journeys in the formation of these relationships and the maintenance of love and intimacy across distance, and the analysis ends when the couples start to move countries of residence to live together. Thus, rather than "cross-cultural married life", the term "cross-cultural relationships" is used to stress that this book focuses on the process of courtship through long-distance correspondence between Thai women and Western men.

Investigating Relationships Through "The Work of Imagination"

This book uses "imagination" as a key concept for examining how cross-cultural relationships between Thai women and Western men are initiated and developed across national boundaries. The role of imagination is not only evident in individuals' motivations for and decisions to pursue cross-cultural relationships but it is also clearly seen in the development and maintenance of love and intimacy in cyberspace. The section below begins with a consideration of the role of women's imagination in cross-cultural relationships. It explores the view of "Western men" through the experiences and insights of Thai women, before examining the concept of imagination in online romantic relationships. The discussion illustrates how imagination becomes a source of women's agency and a driver of cross-cultural relationship dynamics.

Modern Men: Women's Imagination in Cross-Cultural Relationships

Appadurai (1996) offers interesting insights into the potentially transformative nature of imagination. He argues that imagination in the contemporary world plays a significant role in several different ways. First, imagination is no longer confined to the expressive space of art, myth, and ritual. It has now become a part of individuals' everyday lives. The images, scripts, models, and narratives that come through mass media become imaginative resources, which spill over into ordinary experiences. People can deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives. Second, he challenges the claim that imagination will be undermined by processes of commoditization, industrial capitalism, and secularization. Instead, there is growing

evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often facilitates imagination by mobilizing resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general "agency". Appadurai also distinguishes between imagination and fantasy. That is, while the idea of fantasy has an emphasis on the private and carries the inescapable connotation of thought divorced from project and action, imagination can become a fuel for action. Appadurai (1996, 7) suggests that "imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape". Third, there is a distinction between the individual and collective senses of imagination. Imagination is not limited to individuals, but it is also a property of collectives. Indeed, it is through a "community of sentiment" that a group begins to imagine and feel things together. He argues that "collective experiences of the mass media, especially film and video, can create sodalities of worship and charisma" (Ibid., 8). These sodalities are often transnational and frequently operate beyond the boundaries of the nation. They have the ability to create the possibility of convergences in translocal social action. Thus, for Appadurai (1996, 4), the work of imagination is "neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplinary", but rather is "a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern". Imagination has become a social practice, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility.

Drawing on Appadurai's insight, imagination could be something that enables Thai women to pursue and develop cross-cultural relationships online. Recent developments in information and communications technology (ICT), mass media, and global migration have created and extended women's imagination of Western partners in their everyday lives. Consider the story of Chan. As previously mentioned, although she did not seek economic mobility and migration, her desire to enter into a cross-cultural relationship was propelled by fantasies and imaginings about love, gender, sexuality, tradition, and modernity (Constable 2005, 7). The imagining of modern and romantic *poochai farang*[3] (Western men) was an important factor in Chan's motivation to pursue a cross-cultural relationship online.

When referring to Westerners, Thais generally use the term *farang*, which is defined as "a person of the white race" (Royal Institute of

Thailand 2013). However, in Esara's (2009, 404) examination of Thai women's perceptions of Western men, she found that when Thai women used the term *farang* to discuss their ideal partners, they were referring specifically to "Caucasian men from Western, more-developed countries to the exclusion of other racial groups and nationalities". Esara argues that women's imagining of Western partners arises from their exposure to foreign cultures facilitated by transnational contacts with Thai women who had already married and lived abroad. In addition, their own observations of foreign tourists, as well as the Thai and Western media, play a significant role in how *farang* are conceptualized.

Before deciding to engage in intermarriage dating sites, as discussed in Chap. 2, Chan and other women whom I interviewed defined the term, *poochai farang*, in a similar way to the conceptions of the ideal Western partner held by the women in Esara's study. *Poochai farang* was constructed as referring to modern and romantic Caucasian men from modern, developed countries. This demonstrates how these women's imagining of Western men inevitably revolved around the cultural logic of desire and the political-economic differences between Western countries and Thailand. Many Thai women expect *poochai farang* to have embraced more modern and open-mined ideas about gender roles than *poochai thai* (Thai men). As Constable (2005, 7) argues, women's imagining of a modern outlook and the power and attractiveness of Western men is an important motivational factor behind their decision to pursue cross-cultural relationships. Thus, it is argued that imagination is the source of agency that allows women to seek and desire more modern and romantic partners than those available in Thailand.

On the one hand, women's imagination is influenced by political economy and seems to be a property of collectives (Appadurai 1996; Constable 2005); but on the other hand, women's imagination is also situated. Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) argue that imagination is important in terms of being transformative. They proffer the concept of "situated imagination", which emphasizes the potentially creative role of imagination. For them, the concept of imagination takes its place in "the process of mental negotiation between the contradictions of experiences and perceptions as well as between what is and what ought to be" (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002, 327).

This concept highlights the fact that imagination is viewed as a changing and ongoing construction related to specific situations. In this book, the meaning of "Western/Western men" is derived from Thai women's

constructions of *farang/poochai farang*. Such constructions are an emancipatory process that can alter over the duration of a relationship in response to new personal experiences, changing social contexts, and varying situations. Thus, the particular features of a *farang* transform over time in response to new experiences, as discussed through the example of Jin in Chap. 4. The work of women's imagining of Western men is important in understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships. Not just in terms of facilitating women's motivations and decisions for pursuing the relationships but also in terms of making a choice to develop, maintain, or terminate these relationships.

Love Online: Romantic and Internet Imagination

In addition to women's construction of Western men, the role of imagination can be clearly seen in the literature on romantic love and online relationships. Illouz (2012) argues that the exercise of imagination is central to modern emotional life. Modernity has extended new ways of using imagination in the realm of private life, mostly through mass media, which provide visual displays of powerful narratives of the good life. For Illouz (2012, 200), imagination is "the capacity to substitute for the real experiences of the real objects", and therefore "tries to imitate the reality by relying on the sensations, feelings, and emotions which make present that which is absent". Thus, this view of imagination is especially salient in the realm of love. In her study, Illouz explores the relationships between the emotion of love and imagination, and suggests that the role of imagination is clearly observed when in love because love can create its object through imagination. The imaginary invocation of the beloved is as powerful as his/her presence. Thus, when loving another, imagination can make "an emotion felt and dreamed about future before it actually happens, and this anticipatory emotion, in turn, shapes the evaluation of the present and that future" (Ibid., 206).

Illouz (2012, 227) also argues that, in the context of modern culture, anticipatory imagination can be distinguished by two forms. The first form is based on a synthesis of a multitude of mental images, narratives, and commodities, such as the desire for love that follows visual vignettes. The second form is an anticipation produced by attempts to imitate the actual encounter by using technology, such as online dating. Thus, the style of imagination deployed in and by online dating must be understood in the specific context of technology that disembodies and textualizes

encounters. Illouz uses the term "traditional" romantic imagination/love to explain the notion of romantic imagination/love based on the presence of two physical bodies and face-to-face meeting. She proposes that the Internet constitutes a radical departure from such a tradition of imagination/love. However, in this study, I use the term "normative" romantic imagination/love instead of "traditional" romantic imagination/love to stress that the notion of romantic imagination/love, based on assumptions about physical proximity, remains strong and plays an important role in a modern society.

For Illouz (2012, 229–230), Internet imagination stands in opposition to normative romantic imagination.[4] While normative romantic imagination is based on the body and combines the present objects with past images and experiences, Internet imagination relies on a mass, text-based cognitive knowledge and is dominated by a prevalence of language in the process of evaluation. Moreover, Internet imagination demands knowledge of another based on an accretion of attributes, rather than being holistic. This allows people to retract undesirable attributes and build new ones in evaluation of another. Therefore, Internet imagination is an opportunity for people to fill in the gap and enhance the image of another.

However, although Internet imagination is more selective and flexible than normative romantic imagination, this does not mean that online relationships are not real. As I noted earlier, cyberspace is a real space that provides a virtual environment in which real people have actual interactions with other real people. Although Internet imagination is not a physical space in which two people interact, and so it might be said that such online contexts may not actually exist, Internet imagination nevertheless expresses what these people really want in a relationship. As Ben-Ze'ev (2004, 82) argues, "cyberspace introduces many alternatives to our present situations. It does not necessarily describe how people behave in reality but how they could behave". Thus, although the notion of the "real" in relation to online and offline relationships is problematic, it is incorrect to regard the term "real" as the opposite of the term "virtual". In this study, therefore, I use the term "physical" in denoting the opposite of "virtual" and the term "offline" to indicate the opposite of "online".

In short, the concept of Internet imagination demonstrates the creative potential in online relationships. Imagination becomes a source of women's agency and a driver of change in such relationships. It allows women to understand the past and to contemplate the future. The concept of imagination, therefore, aids an understanding of how definitions

of "Western" and notions of romantic love are situated, constructed, and reconstructed across time, distance, context, and culture, and how such constructions shape the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships.

Nevertheless, cross-cultural relationships cannot be understood apart from the role and impact of gender and sexuality. Such relationships, both in online and offline contexts, differ from other relationships due to the complex ways of representing and positioning oneself within social constructs of nationality, gender, sexuality, and cultural differences. Thus, while the view of love and intimacy in late modernity increasingly centers on the notion of "pure relationships" that are more egalitarian (Giddens 1992), love and intimacy in cross-cultural relationships remain based on unequal power relations. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to gender and national inequalities in the formation and development of such relationships.

The Democratization of Love and Intimacy

In the late modern world, love and intimacy tend to be viewed as a core element of interpersonal life. This perspective transforms relationships from something that is dominated by external considerations of politics or economics to something that is a matter of choice by the participants and where the relationship is valued for its own sake (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998). In this section, I primarily focus on Giddens' theories of transformations of intimacy because his ideas have led to intense debate about intimacy and personal relationships. I examine his ideas and some related critiques within the framing of the democratization of intimacy.

Giddens (1992) suggests that a radical transformation of intimacy in personal relationships has taken place in late modernity. An increased emphasis on intimacy, together with the separation of sexuality from reproduction, has generated a shift from the romantic love ideal to that of a "pure relationship". According to Giddens (1992, 45), romantic love is a phenomenon whereby individuals find their one true love, who "answers a lack which the individual does not even necessarily recognize" and in this way, "the flawed individual is made whole". He argues that romantic love presumes some degree of self-interrogation. It makes a woman question how she feels about another, how the other feels about her, and whether their feelings are profound enough to support a long-term involvement. Women's dreams and practices of romantic love have

often led to "grim domestic subjection" (Ibid., 62). Thus, romantic love has always tended to be imbalanced in gender terms, in part because it entails a lifelong commitment.

Giddens (1992, 61) also argues that, in the late modern era, ideals of romantic love tended to fragment "under the pressure of female sexual emancipation and autonomy" and give way to a new form of "pure" or "confluent" love. For Giddens, the pure relationship is part of a generic restructuring of intimacy, which is more egalitarian than romantic love versions. In the pure relationship, love is "confluent love", which is more active and contingent. It presumes equality in emotional give and take as well as mutual satisfaction between partners. Hence, the rise of the pure relationship meant that love is no longer limited by external constraints. Women are then free to negotiate the terms of their own relationships. Confluent love has emerged to fulfil women's need for intimacy, yet it lasts only as long as they find it rewarding.

However, while Giddens claims that love in late modernity is undergoing a process of democratization, there are some studies that criticize Giddens for oversimplifying gender issues, particularly in relation to his conclusion that men and women are heading for greater equality (Evans 2003; Jamieson 1998; Langford 1999). Based on an impressive selection of empirical studies on heterosexual relationships, Jamieson (1998, 1999), for example, argues that intimacy remains structured by inequalities. Men tend to exercise more power than women in heterosexual partnerships do. She also suggests that intimacy is multidimensional and diverse. Disclosing intimacy, which is the basis of intimacy in the pure relationship, is not the sole or necessarily the ascendant type of intimacy. Loving and caring are also dimensions of intimacy, which are very different from the mutual disclosure of the pure relationship. For Jamieson, love and care expressed through a more practical doing and giving are more important than a mutual disclosure and exploration of each other's selves. Love and intimacy have many different meanings and expressions over time and space. What people want and expect from love is a complex social construction that varies historically and culturally.

Thus, for critics of Giddens, personal relationships are not typically shaped in whatever way gives pleasure without the political economy of love. As Langford (1999) suggests, the shift from marriage as an institution to the ideal of fulfilment within personal relationships may highlight and intensify gender differences in emotionality. For example, while Giddens claims that personal relationships last only as long as couples

find it rewarding for both parties, Langford argues that such relation-ships seem to continue even though women find them most unsatisfying. This is because men and women appear to have a quite different ability or willingness to think and talk in terms of love and intimacy and to make an emotional effort to sustain heterosexual relationships. For Langford, the need to be loved drives women into initiating and maintaining relation-ships with men. The democratization of love and intimacy therefore does not seem to play much of a role in heterosexual relationships. In contrast, love and intimacy seem to exist to reproduce a dynamic of domination and submission.

However, in critical engagement with Giddens' idea of the democra-tization of intimacy, it appears that such critics do not reject the fact that love and intimacy tend to be a core element of contemporary interpersonal life. The debates on the democratization of intimacy seem to illustrate that viewing intimacy through the lens of family and kin alone is no longer viable. The move away from a structural analysis of categorical relation-ships to perspectives of personal intimacy has shifted attention onto the ways that "everyday practices of intimacy constitute a sense of relatedness and family" (Gabb 2008, 76).

This debate regarding theories of the democratization of love and inti-macy has occurred primarily in relation to the context of contemporary Western societies. The main focus of the discussion is whether romantic love has become "democratized" when personal relationships are no lon-ger determined by external constraints. This debate seems to be based on the emergence of relative economic equality between men and women. In this study, it is not my purpose to discuss this debate in the context of pro-cesses of social change in contemporary Western society. Rather, I attempt to place such debates in the framework of cross-cultural relationships in which love and intimacy are constructed within unequal power relations between not only genders but also nationalities (Constable 2003). I ques-tion how love and intimacy are interpreted by people from different cul-tural backgrounds. It is entirely possible, and even probable, that such people would have different expectations as to what constitutes intimacy. Hence, certain questions need to be explored. Are men and women in cross-cultural relationships equally susceptible to the emotions of love and intimacy? What is necessary for women to sustain love and intimacy in cross-cultural relationships?

Doing Research on Love and Intimacy in Online Cross-Cultural Relationships

Jamieson et al. (2011, 4–5) argue that there are important differences between doing research on relationships as opposed to other aspects of social enquiry. First, the evolution of a sociological approach in family and relationship research has shifted from simply drawing on the nuclear family to a wider understanding that embraces intimate or personal relationships. These broadening conceptions of family and relationships have propelled research designs and methods toward those that aim to capture a sense of how intimate relationships are negotiated and constructed in everyday lives. Second, research on relationships generally involves trying to gain insight into those experiences, thoughts, and feelings that many people consider private. Thus, some aspects of relationships may be hidden to preserve relationship secrets and maintain loyalties within a couple. Last, the individual personal experiences of the researcher about the topic may mean that they come to the research with certain preconceptions and biases. This may affect data analysis. The way that a researcher defines relationships and the practices of love and intimacy may involve greater emotional apprehension because they are writing about something that is emotionally charged in their own everyday life. Consequently, when doing research on relationships, it is necessary to be aware of these preconceptions and biases. The requirement for self-reflexivity needs to be heightened.

Drawing on Jamieson et al. (2011) leads me to emphasize the process of self-reflexivity. As noted earlier, I had never participated in local and intermarriage dating sites to search for a partner and I had even thought that it was impossible to find a relationship in cyberspace. Nevertheless, my close friend's experience challenged my preconceptions and bias regarding online and intermarriage markets. It opened my mind to contemplate the reasons for seeking relationships across cultures and to reflect on the various ways in which intimate relationships are formed.

When I began this research, I started to gather literature on the phenomenon and chatted with Chan via Skype. At that time, Chan had already moved to Germany to live with John and was staying in her new home and caring for her child. When her child was sleeping, she was able to go online to chat or video call with her family and friends in Thailand. Being able to see and talk to Chan via video call encouraged me to ponder how

I would gather data, who I would include in my study, and when I would stop collecting that data.

At the beginning of the study, I conducted online interviews with two groups of women. The first were those who were already in a relationship or in their initial three years of marriage with a Western man whom they had met through intermarriage dating sites. The second were those who were searching for relationships with Western men on intermarriage dating sites, some of whom had never actually met their online daters in person. After finishing these interviews, I chose to focus on the stories of women who had at least one experience of physically meeting their online Western daters in Thailand. The decision was reached because this research is particularly focused on examining how cross-cultural relationships that are initiated on online intermarriage sites transition from online to offline contexts. The physical meeting, then, became an important criterion for choice of participants.

My analysis in this book has primarily drawn on the narratives of 24 Thai women. These women tell their stories and discuss their expectations and experiences of initiating, developing, and maintaining/terminating cross-cultural relationships in cyberspace. When the research was carried out, 13 of the women had married their online daters. Seven of these women had migrated to live in their husband's countries, while six of them were still living in Thailand and had not yet decided where to settle down after marriage. Five women were at the stage of dealing with the challenges of sustaining a long-distance relationship across time and space. In addition, there were six women whose relationship with their online daters had fallen apart after they had met them in person. Three of these women were in a relationship crisis after finding out that their online partners were just looking for holiday girlfriends, while the other three did not continue their relationship after they first met their online daters, instead turning back to intermarriage dating sites to search for new Western online daters.

I spent nearly one year conducting fieldwork. The first five months were spent collecting data in online contexts through e-mails and online chats. Subsequently, I followed up with some Thai women who were living in Thailand and were willing to meet in person. The main objective of the fieldwork in Thailand was to conduct unstructured, in-depth interviews and acquire more specific data on daily life. I did face-to-face interviews with 14 Thai women who live in different areas in Thailand, and I

accompanied two of them on visits to their hometowns in the South and the Northeast.

There were also ten women interviewed whom I never met in person. Six of them had moved to their male partner's countries, including Germany, England, and the USA, after they had married Western men. The other four said that it was not convenient to meet me in person at the time I was conducting face-to-face interviews in Thailand. However, I sometimes interviewed these women via video call. This created a shared sense of visual co-presence and provided additional cues about their physical appearance and personalities. Moreover, as I discuss in Chap. 5, online interviews, especially with the women who were living overseas, were useful for accessing insights into sensitive issues, such as sexual relationships. This might be because they took the view that they had never met me and would probably never meet me in person.

Structure of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. The first part explores the motivations for and decisions to pursue cross-cultural relationships on intermarriage dating sites. The second examines the representations of Thai women on intermarriage websites by looking at three different sources: the market (intermarriage dating sites/agencies), Western men, and Thai women. The last part explores the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships in the transition from online strangers to romantic partners. I outline these three parts in detail below.

Motivations for Pursuing Cross-cultural Relationships

In the past, motivations to engage in cross-cultural relationships have been explained in terms of push and pull factors (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008). Economic deprivation and opportunities have been the primary explanations for women's motivations to engage in cross-cultural relationships. However, as noted previously, this rationalization is inadequate because women who pursue cross-cultural relationships make their decision based on a range of factors. Although some women try to find a foreign husband because they want to extricate themselves and their families from poverty, it should be emphasized that women's motivations in cross-cultural relationships are not shaped purely by economic gain.

These motivations and choices are also influenced by other social and cultural factors. Some of these social and cultural factors are explored in the first part of the book, particularly in response to the following questions: why and how do Thai women turn to intermarriage dating sites to search for love and marriage with Western men? How do the motivations for cross-cultural relationships relate to the political economy and cultural ideologies of love and marriage?

Chapter 2 examines what factors facilitate women's motivations and decisions for pursuing cross-cultural relationships online. This chapter begins with a discussion of the motivators that spur women to choose to search for love and marriage with Western men. This discussion addresses women's adherence to cultural perceptions of love and marriage and the influence of their socioeconomic status on their actual choice of romantic partner. It highlights the diversity of Thai women who turn to intermarriage dating sites. The second section investigates why intermarriage dating sites have become an important channel for searching for Western partners. It also compares intermarriage dating sites with other methods that Thai women might use to meet a Western man in Thailand.

Representations of Thai Women in Cyberspace

Cyberspace allows individuals in the context of globalization and transnational networks to consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. However, the most popular discourse of cyberspace and its role in cross-cultural relationships is that of the commodification of women in developing countries (Cabrera 2007). Cyberspace appears to be perceived as the latest digital technology that has transformed the mail-order bride business and further facilitated the commodification of women. The packaging of women as brides on the Internet is similar to their portrayal in colorful printed catalogues of the mail-order bride business. So-called Third world women are still viewed on intermarriage websites through the colonial male gaze and subjected to gendered representations (Angeles and Sunanta 2007).

Yet, such an explanation reflects only one side of intermarriage websites. It is based on assumptions about the passivity of these women and reduces intermarriage websites to a form of mail-order bride business. Once again, this perspective does not account for the range and diversity of experiences. Unlike intermarriage agencies, intermarriage dating sites that I examine in this study provide only the communication tools to make meeting over the Internet easier. Such distinctions raise a number of

questions about women's agency in the intermarriage marketplace. How do women represent themselves when they enter the field of intermarriage dating sites? How do intermarriage websites (intermarriage dating *sites* and intermarriage dating *agencies*) represent Thai women as brides to Western men? How do these representations relate to political economy, gender, and national identity? How do women negotiate and cope with these representations? To deepen an understanding of the ideas and perceptions held by Western men about Thai women, ten Western men who used intermarriage websites were also interviewed. These interviews sought to ascertain why these men decided to search online for Thai women and why they wished to marry a Thai wife in particular.

Chapter 3 examines both women's self-representations and the ways in which they are perceived by others, starting with the representations of Thai women on intermarriage websites and Western men's perceptions of them. The discussion also details the effects of these dynamics on Thai women. The chapter begins by reviewing changing practices and attitudes toward cross-cultural relationships in Thailand in order to explain how such relationships relate to history, political economy, and globalization processes. The second section explores how intermarriage websites operate and how they represent Thai women as girlfriends and brides, before comparing the marketing strategies of intermarriage dating sites and intermarriage dating agencies. In the third section, I examine the ideas and perceptions held by Western men who use intermarriage dating sites to search online for Thai women. The last section focuses on women's self-representations when composing their own profiles on intermarriage dating sites. It shows that, although online profiles have become a mechanism for presenting self and identity online (Boyd and Heer 2006), women's self-representations in many ways echo the stereotypes of traditional wives that are represented on intermarriage dating agencies and in the so-called mail-order bride industry. This is particularly the case when women assume that it will help initiate relationships with Western men.

The Dynamics and Processes of Cross-cultural Relationships

The primary intent of the third part is to explore the complexity of situational, cultural, and structural factors that are associated with Thai women's experiences of initiating and developing an online relationship with a Western man. It examines how these women define and negotiate their relationships with Western men at each stage of the process. Due

to embedded differences of gender and sexuality in each culture, it is important in cross-cultural relationships to explore each dater's comprehension of the connections between love and desire, and desire and fantasy. Similarly, it is essential that they understand each other's perceptions about consent for pleasure and the importance of sexuality in intimate relationships. Therefore, this part analyzes the dynamics and processes of cross-cultural relationships. It lends itself to an analysis of gender and sexuality, cultural meanings of romantic love, and social constructions of intimacy in the context of globalization and transnational networks.

The key questions are how, when, and why the women make the transition in cross-cultural relationships from the initial online context to an offline one, and how cyberspace shapes that transition. To understand such dynamics, it is necessary to consider these processes within the work of women's imagination. As Illouz (2012) argues, the role of imagination is central to modern emotional life. Imagination can make people feel and dream about the future before it actually happens, and this anticipatory imagination, in turn, shapes the evaluation of the present and that future. Thus, drawing on Illouz's insight, it becomes possible to understand how imagination might be a source of women's agency and a driver of cross-cultural relationship dynamics.

Chapter 4 focuses on the development of online romantic love. It analyzes how courtship between Thai women and Western men occurs in cyberspace. Currently, online dating provides a huge virtual romantic shopping mall. Personal profiles posted on Internet dating sites allow for overt advertising of specific personal resources and preferences without any personal and emotional investment. This discussion begins by exploring the marketable characteristics of Western men, such as nationality, social class, race, education, age, and physical appearance. At this stage, the multiplicity of contacts is reduced because women limit their correspondence to those few who possess their ideal characteristics. The chapter illustrates the process of transition from online strangers to online partners/lovers. The sequencing of the process of communication is examined in turn: from the first sighting on online profiles, toward spending more time together through online communication tools, then getting to know each other as online daters, and finally online expression of feelings and affection.

Chapter 5 investigates the transition from online to offline relationships. It focuses on this shift to the first encounter offline. First, the processes of setting up the meeting are examined: for example, which place is chosen for the first meeting? I also look at how they prepare for

their initial face-to-face encounter. This process underlines the inequalities of nationality, class, and gender in relation to immigration processes as well as the embedded differences related to gender and sexuality in each culture. Then, I focus on women's experiences during the first physical meeting: for example, what actually happens when they meet their Western online daters in real life for the first time and how they feel during this first meeting.

Chapter 6 emphasizes the maintenance of love and commitment across distance. The first section considers the stories of women who have pursued a long-distance relationship after the first physical meeting. These narratives show that when women have to address the process of moving in and out of their partner's physical co-presence, the exchange of virtual and proxy co-presences between couples can create more abstractly imagined forms of love and emotional care. It enables imaginary co-presence and allows couples to articulate their interdependence within their everyday lives. Finally, the chapter examines the process of falling out of love, as experienced by six women who felt both physically and emotionally detached from their online daters after they had met in person.

The Conclusion draws all chapters together to produce new findings on the subjects of love and intimacy in cross-cultural and online contexts. The first section discusses whether the ways in which love and intimacy are initiated and developed on the Internet mark a radical departure from the culture of love and romanticism. The second section considers the debates about love and inequality in intimate cross-cultural relationships. The chapter illustrates that, in the absence of regular opportunities to meet in person, the technology of the Internet offers new ways of managing the relationship at a distance and sustaining women's imagination over time and space.

Notes

1. To protect the privacy of participants, all names are pseudonyms.
2. The terms "international relationships" and "cross-cultural relationships" are used interchangeably in this book. However, I particularly employ the term "international relationship" to focus on relationships across national borders.
3. The term *poochai farang* literally means "Western men". However, in this book, women often used the term *farang* and *poochai farang* interchangeably.

4. The distinction between normative romantic love and Internet love will be examined further in Chap. 5.

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Motivations for Pursuing Cross-cultural Relationships Online

Thai single men of my age or a little older are interested in much younger women. They might be afraid of marrying me because they see me as a highly educated, choosy woman. I might be able to find a Thai man who is much less successful and less educated than I am, but I don't want that. I thought *farang* men might be different. They might not be interested in my economic status since *farang* were often well off, and they would be less interested than Thai men in very young women. That was why I went to an intermarriage dating site to search for a *farang* man (Ping, online interview, December 2011).

I applied to be a member of dating sites to seek *farang* because I had endured bad experiences with two former Thai husbands. I didn't want to marry a Thai man again. I didn't trust Thai men. I thought most Thai men didn't like divorced women anyway, and I also thought *farang* men would not look down on me for being divorced. I really wanted to settle down again, so I went to an online dating site to search for *farang* who was more than 45 years old. I wanted to find someone and marry again. (May, online interview, September 2011)

When women from economically poorer countries turn to intermarriage dating sites to seek cross-cultural relationships with men from wealthier nations, the distinctive economic disparity between their countries is often identified as the primary incentive. Economic deprivation and lack of opportunities have often been used to explain the motivations behind pursuing such relationships (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008). The most common theory is based on "push" factors in the sending country

and "pull" factors in the receiving country (Borjas 1989). According to this perspective, economic difficulties and the women's relatively low competence in well-paid occupations in the country of origin may push them to seek migration, but the high cost of international migration and more heavily restrictive immigration policies in the receiving countries can impede their relocation. Marrying a man who resides in a well-developed country thus might be the best option through which these women can access both their desired destination and employment opportunities (Fan and Huang 1998).

However, the interviews quoted above serve to challenge such common stereotypes. Ping, a woman in her late-30s, stated that she moved into online relationships because she wanted to marry and have her own family, while May, a divorced woman in her mid-40s, turned to online dating sites because she wanted to find a Western man to settle down with again after she had undergone bad experiences with two previous Thai husbands. Searching for alternative avenues to migration or seeking economic security are clearly not their primary motivations. Whether divorced or never married, these women look for profound bonds. They want to find someone who really engages them mentally and emotionally. However, this perspective has been neglected in explanations of women's motivations for seeking men from more prosperous nations. This point then precipitates the question as to whether the presence of economic and social gain in cross-cultural relationships necessarily excludes the fact that the women are seeking "love" and "intimacy". Why do these women pursue relationships via online contexts with men from other countries? Likewise, prior to turning to intermarriage dating sites, what perceptions and expectations do the women have of the Western men they will find there?

This chapter presents Thai women's motivations for, and decisions to engage in, cross-cultural relationships online. My argument is that women do not choose to pursue online dating per se, but rather they choose to engage in relationships with Western men. However, it is the lack of opportunities to meet and interact with Western men in Thailand that prompts them to seek online solutions. The first section deconstructs the simplistic and mechanistic explanation of an exclusively economic approach and explores other social and cultural determinants that influence these women. It addresses the women's adherence to cultural perceptions of marriage and the family in Thailand as well as the effect of their socioeconomic status on their choice of a romantic partner in Thailand.

Moreover, it explores understandings of Western society and Western men as perceived by Thai women, perceptions that are reinforced by both local and global media and by the popularity of tourism in Thailand. The second section highlights why the women decide to choose intermarriage dating sites as a channel to search for cross-cultural relationships. It also compares intermarriage dating sites with other methods through which Thai women can meet Western men.

Why Thai Women Seek Cross-cultural Relationships

As discussed earlier, attributing a purely economic motivation for pursuing cross-cultural relationships is both inaccurate and inadequate, as it overlooks the diversity that exists among women. Women who pursue cross-cultural relationships online come from widely varying backgrounds, featuring distinct social and economic contexts, and wide-ranging educational levels. Each of the women interviewed was located differently in terms of the intersections of class, education, gender, and regional identity. Moreover, they had disparate expectations going into intermarriage dating sites. In what follows, I explore five women's motivations for seeking cross-cultural relationships; notably, the experiences of the women are underwritten by their divergent social statuses and different stages in their life cycles. I have chosen to detail these experiences because they each highlight particular aspects of their search that are different from the others, and in doing so, they reflect individual patterns emerging from the specific intersections of age, life stage, and class circumstances.

The five women are Ping, May, Min, Ying, and Lek. Ping, in her late 30s, is well educated and had never married before turning to an intermarriage dating site. She wanted to marry and have a child before she turned forty. May, in her mid-40s, is also well educated and earned a high income. She had been married twice and had two children. She sought a third serious relationship after her children left home. Min, in her early 20s, was a single mother. She primarily wanted to find a man who could accept her past. Ying, a young woman in her mid-20s, dreamt about living overseas. She wanted to learn and practice English in order to secure a new job and a chance to move overseas. Lek, a woman in her 30s, had been married once and had one child. She was worried about her son's future and the lack of opportunities for her in the Thai job market. She turned to intermarriage dating sites to find a more secure life for herself and her son.

A Desire to Be a Wife and Mother

In January 2013, Ping put her daughter's pictures on Facebook only a week after she gave birth. Having followed her life for the previous year, it became clear to me that the process of change in her life reflected a key reason why Thai middle-class, highly educated single women turn to intermarriage dating sites to seek intimate relationships and/or marriages with Western men. Ping, a 37-year-old woman, finished her Master's Degree at a prominent public university in Bangkok. She worked as a highly placed government official in Thailand. I was introduced to her by my close friend, who was her secondary school classmate. We started to chat online in December 2011 after I sent her an invitation to be my Facebook friend. At that time, Ping was in an online relationship with Glenn, a Norwegian man who was 13 years older than her.

Her relationship with Glenn started in November 2011, after Ping had been a member of one dating site for six months. They talked online for over five months via Skype before they met in person in April 2012. Ten days after the first meeting, Glenn told her that he loved her and proposed marriage. Ping accepted his marriage proposal without hesitation. I was surprised at that news because I had not received any reply from Ping whilst Glenn was in Thailand with her. She had disappeared from Facebook and MSN for nearly two weeks. She was back on Facebook again after Glenn went to Singapore to work for three days. She told me about her experience:

> Many things happened in those ten days. We had a great relationship and we were wonderful companions for each other. You know … I am ready to make a deeper commitment. That's why I went to an online dating site to search for someone. I know what I want in life. I don't wish to spend my life alone. So, when Glenn asked me to be his wife, I can't remember the exact words that he used, but apparently I said yes, because I have seen my future [with him]. We are going to marry in the next couple of weeks before he returns to work overseas again. (Ping, online interview, April 2012)

One week later, I saw Ping and Glenn's pre-wedding photos on her Facebook page. That was the first time that Ping revealed her relationship with Glenn to her Facebook friends. Just ten hours after she posted the photos, Ping received many comments and questions. She did not reply to any questions. She just let them know that she was going to get married next week. This reminded me of the first conversations between Ping and I in December 2011. Ping told me that she wanted to keep her online

relationship a secret. She felt embarrassed and did not want to let anyone know, except for her close friends, that she had been talking with a man she had never met in person. She revealed the relationship only when she was confident that Glenn really existed and that he was what she had expected. She decided to talk to me because she wanted to know how many women had success in such a pursuit. As she opened up to me, it became clear that Ping really wanted to get married and to have a child. She was serious about her chances of finding a husband that way. Ping's story led me to question the meaning of being single in Thailand. Why do highly educated single Thai women opt for marriage, as opposed to maintaining their single status?

Cultural Ideologies of Marriage and the Family

In Thailand, like many cultures, the ideology of romantic love and having a family stresses to women that finding a partner, preferably a soul mate, is absolutely fundamental to their happiness. Although Ping has effectively entered the labor market and been successful in the educational system, it seems that her life is unfulfilled if she is unable to find someone with whom to progress into married life. This might be because one of the key markers of the transition from youth to adulthood is entry into marriage (Blossfeld and Timm 2003, 4). A single status is not a common or traditional pattern in Thailand. Although there are some legitimate alternatives taken by single Thai people such as becoming a member of a religious order or remaining unmarried in the family home to be a caregiver for their elderly parents, these options are often interpreted as a desperate choice for single people who have limited marital opportunities, rather than a voluntary decision. Most Thais are socialized to expect that they will marry and spend their lives in the company of a husband or wife. With companionate marriage as the ideal, potential partners are valued for their ability to fulfill not only physical needs but also emotional needs for affection (Tsunokai et al. 2009, 4). Ping described this as follows:

> I am alone. My parents have passed away. I have only one elder brother. He got married and has two boys. I want that [marriage and children] to be the second half of my life. Like all women, I want to marry someone. It isn't important what nationality he is. What is important is that we have the same goals. I want to have a baby if I can get married. I was in a relationship with a Thai man for many years … long ago, but we ended it for a number of reasons when I was 30 years old. I have been taking care of myself for the last seven years. Now I miss the companionship. I need someone to love. I need someone to fulfill myself. (Ping, online interview, December 2011)

Marriage and having a family are considered to be essential for women across Asian countries. Krishna's (2007, 8) study of single Asian women illustrates that, even though the number of never-married women in Asia has increased, marriage is still seen as providing not only mental and emotional security but also legitimacy and social recognition. Being single is always treated more like a missed opportunity to marry rather than a woman's conscious decision. Thus, whether the decision to remain single is voluntary or involuntary, single women are always perceived as "Other" for defying the norms of society and are also scrutinized more vigilantly (Krishna 2007, 148–149). This is reflected in the stories of Ping, Chan, Jin, and other single women in their 30s. These women commented that the attitudes of their relatives and friends were not free from bias and prejudice. Although they were well educated and financially secure, they were often seen as isolated, lonely, and unhappy women who had repeatedly failed in their relationships. As Ping explained when we got together in her hometown one week before she met Glenn:

> When I meet my old friends or relatives here [her hometown], they always ask me when I will get married. If you are older than thirty and not in a couple, this opens the door to questions about whether something is wrong with you. You know … sometimes I didn't want to be back home because I got tired of those questions. For the seven years following the end of my relationship with my Thai ex-boyfriend, I never had a relationship. I didn't know how to answer those questions. It seemed I had made a big mistake. The worst thing about being single was the pressure from my brother. He frequently commented that he was worried about me. He tried to introduce me to some Thai men, but I wasn't attracted to them. Although I wanted to find someone and settle down, I didn't want a Thai man who was much less successful and less educated than me. When I met Glenn and talked to him over those five months, I felt like he would be the right one. Anyway, even if he didn't meet my expectations, I would marry him because I got so many comments from my close friends and family that I need to hurry up or I would miss my opportunity to have a child. I hoped Glenn could make my dreams come true. (Ping, face-to-face interview, March 2012)

It seemed that Ping struggled with the cultural ideal that happiness was dependent on having a family life with a soul mate and a child. Being single is considered more acceptable for women in their 20s, but after reaching their 30s, women are often scrutinized by friends, family members, and others about their single status. Single women over thirty are still stigmatized in Thailand. They are always perceived to be too fastidious or

choosy, and it is assumed they will be lonely later on (Williams and Guest 2005, 172). The family ideal is internalized by women and constantly reinforced by family and friends in their everyday lives. Moreover, women in their 30s have to struggle with whether they want to be a mother, and if so, how they might achieve that goal if they cannot find a partner who meets their expectations (see also Trimberger 2005). Childbearing outside of marriage is still extremely rare in Asian countries, although access to sex outside of marriage, especially premarital sexual activity with their future spouse, is increasing and has become more socially acceptable (Jones 2010, 90).

Ping clearly desired children and tried to reach her romantic and family goals by marrying a Western man in order to become a mother. Delaying marriage had been possible for her when she was in her 20s and in a relationship with a Thai man. At that time, she preferred to enjoy the material and emotional advantages of co-residence with her parents. However, after she reached her mid-30s and her parents passed away, she worried about her future. This might be because family relationships in Thailand are based on a set of reciprocal obligations where parents raise and support their children with the expectation that their children would ultimately support their parents in old age. The adult children are expected to offer financial, physical, and emotional support as the parents grow older (Suksomboon 2009; Charoensri 2011). Although economic support is not important for Ping, she still expected to receive the emotional support and physical care that she provided for her parents before they passed away.

The Limitation of Local Marriage Markets
Although Ping had a strong desire to be married and to have a child before she was forty, she did not want to marry a Thai man who was less successful and less educated than herself. This motivated her to create a profile on an intermarriage dating site after she turned thirty-six years old. Ping recalled why she decided to search for a Western man:

> For me, it was not easy to decide to search for *farang* on dating sites. I had been thinking about this [a dating site] for many years, but I felt embarrassed to do so. I wished that I had met the right one after I broke up with my boyfriend. I didn't mind whether my husband was Thai or *farang*, but I thought Thai single men of my age or a bit older were interested in much younger women. They might be afraid to marry me because they might see me as a highly educated and picky woman. (Ping, online interview, December 2011)

Gavin Jones (2010, 2004, 2005), the demographer who studied delayed marriage and non-marriage in Southeast and East Asia, argues that although most Asian women entering marriageable age still desire to marry, they face increasing structural difficulties in achieving their goal. The rise in numbers of single people in Asia does not mean a rejection of marriage, but instead it reflects the difficulties involved in meeting suitable partners. Jones (2010) claims that increases in women's education and their ensuing financial independence are important factors in weakening the intensity of this general desire and/or hindering its realization. Moreover, in a gender-traditional society, a good education is important for men because it determines the economic and social status of family. Women tend to prefer men with high levels of education and good labor market potential, and they compete for them in the marriage markets (Blossfeld and Timm 2003, 7). A preference for men to "marry down" and women to "marry up" remains evident.

Among these obstacles to marriage, Jones (2004, 20) notes that "the likelihood that differentially rapid increases in education for females, in the context of traditional attitudes, make for a 'marriage squeeze' that leaves well-educated women and poorly educated men 'stranded', as it were, in the marriage market". Thus, although men in a contemporary society increasingly prefer women with higher qualifications and income potential, for women to "marry down" is quite complicated. Women with a high socioeconomic status may be socially accountable if they marry downwardly (Blossfeld and Timm 2003). Most women still desire to marry men who belong to a higher socioeconomic status than themselves (Raymo and Iwasawa 2005). Female status hypergamy remains strong and plays an important role in Asian society.

In line with the sociological and economic approach to marriage markets, which focuses on the acceptability and appeal of potential partners, the deficit of men with desirable socioeconomic characteristics reduces highly educated women's access to marriage (Guzzo 2006). This is because of the quality, not the quantity, of potential spouses. As Jones (2004) notes, most Asian women entering marriageable age still express a preference to marry if a suitable partner can be found. However, many women are not successful in locating an appropriate spouse because "social standing" is an important factor in determining the choice of a right partner. It might be especially true among women who show a greater tendency to "marry up" (Chen and Takeuchi 2011). Thus, although women still desire relationships, they may be reluctant to enter into relationships with men with

lower qualifications. The size of the pool of desirable partners for highly educated women is smaller than that of other women.

Women who face the "marriage squeeze", like Ping, Jin, and Chan, may find themselves turning to alternative sources to search for a suitable companion. Marrying a man who resides in a well-developed and prosperous country appears to be one option. The interplay between geographical hierarchy and economic disparity between two countries can expand the size of marriage markets. This strategy then allows individuals to access a partner with the characteristics that they believe will fulfill their own relationship needs and desires. In other words, males from wealthier countries can attract women from poorer ones (Abelmann and Kim 2005). Such cross-cultural marriages have been identified as "global hypergamy", which opens the way to the upward geographical mobility of women from less developed locations (Constable 2005, 10). Some highly educated women may use cross-cultural relationships as a way to negotiate the restrictions of the local marriage markets, although they may experience what is called "paradoxical hypergamy". That is to say, while these women may appear to be ascending, moving from a less developed country to a more developed one, such women may in fact face downward class mobility due to the fact that the socioeconomic status of their in-laws may be viewed as lower than that of their own family in the sending area (Constable 2005, 10–11).

Thus, rather than focusing purely on an economic approach, the highly educated women's decisions to pursue cross-cultural relationships online can be shaped and limited by local marriage constraints. Although they come from countries with low aggregate economic indicators, they are well above average in terms of education and income. Marriage becomes less necessary in terms of economic dependence on male earnings. However, there is still significant social pressure to formalize unions. Such women still expect to get married at some point, if a suitable partner can be found. The positive aspects of marriage seemingly continue to outweigh the negative ones (Jones 2004; Williams et al. 2006). Such well-educated women can exchange their higher class status in their home societies for a higher status in terms of nationhood. They may choose "global hypergamy" rather than remain unmarried or marry down locally. Furthermore, some educated women might not perceive the socioeconomic background of Western men to be a major hindrance to marriage. However, this does not mean they do not take this into account. Women still preferred to search for educated Western men on intermarriage dating sites, as will be examined further in Chap. 4.

The Imagining of a "Romantic and Respectful" farang *Man*

In July 2011, May posted about her experiences with Pete on a Thai women's community website, which details everyday life after marrying a foreign man. After I read her story, I wrote a private message to her to introduce myself as a researcher and request her participation in my study. Six weeks later she replied, agreeing to share her experiences about Thai women seeking Western men. May, a 48-year-old woman, had finished her Bachelor's degree and ran her own business. Her first marriage was to a Thai man when she was 24 years old. They had two children. She stayed in this relationship for six years and then divorced when she was 31 years old. She married another Thai man when she was 34 years old, but it ended a couple of years later.

May decided to look for a Western man when she was 43 years old. At that time, her children had left home to study at university. She was lonely and wanted to be in a relationship again. May signed up to be a member of two intermarriage dating sites. She talked to many Western men from England and the USA, but she never met them in person. After a few years of searching, in 2009, she received a message from Pete, an Englishman. He told her that he planned to visit Thailand within the next three months and wanted to talk to her before he left. They communicated over the following three months, and then Pete visited her in Thailand in September 2009. After he returned to England, he asked her to marry him. A simple wedding was held in Thailand in February 2010. At first, May worried about his age (62 years old) and was somewhat reluctant to wed. She finally decided to marry him because she thought it would be more difficult for her, a divorced woman in her mid-40s, to meet and marry a Thai man. Not only were there few opportunities to meet Thai men who were employed and successful relative to herself, but there was also the enduring social stigma attached to divorced women, especially a woman who had been divorced twice.

Like many other divorced women whom I encountered in Thailand, May was interested in meeting Western men because she perceived Western men to be more open-minded and democratic than local Thai men. Hence, she believed that her chances of remarriage were greater with Westerners than with local Thai men, where opportunities were extremely limited. Although divorce no longer held the extreme stigma that it had in the past, divorced women in Thailand still felt themselves to be relatively worthless.

Perceptions of Divorced Women in Thailand

Arditti and Lopez (2005, 143) suggest that it is important to recognize that women's divorce experiences are embedded in a cultural context that influences an understanding of the phenomenon. For Thai women, any stigma that is associated with divorce itself is intensified by sexism and rigid gender roles. To be considered "morally good", Thai women are not supposed to have sexual desires, much less act upon them. Talking or writing about sex is considered culturally and morally improper (Harrison 2002, 456–457). In addition to keeping quiet about sexual issues, Thai women are also expected to be sexually demure and virginal in order to garner respect in society. According to Thai cultural standards, women who have allowed more than one man to access their bodies, regardless of the circumstances—be it as a result of divorce or widowhood and remarriage, promiscuity, or prostitution—are understood to be "bad" women. To qualify as morally "good", Thai women are expected to retain their virginity before marriage and control themselves in their sexual expression. Women who have lost their virginity are not considered suitable women for marriage (Tosakul 2010, 196).

Although non-virgins and divorced women are now more acceptable in contemporary Thai society, the traditional value set is still pervasive in religious, legal, and literary texts as well as in the mass media in Thailand. A study by Knodel et al. (1996) found that virgins are more highly valued by Thai men while non-virgins are often relegated to the status of a "used" object. This value set continues to have impact on non-virgins and divorced women, as they are often denigrated by society. For example, May explained that she faced many difficulties with her second husband because she had failed to live up to Thai cultural expectations of a good woman.

> I was married to my first ex-husband for six years. He left me for another woman when I was pregnant with my second child. I chose to divorce him. I met my second ex-husband when he was my customer. He never looked at other women, but he continually asked me about my sexual experiences with the first ex-husband after we got married. When I would not answer him, he would get angry with me. I couldn't understand why he was like that. It was so weird. He knew I was a divorced woman before he started the relationship with me. I decided to marry him because I thought that he could accept my status as a divorcee. But after we lived together, I realized he couldn't do so. I asked myself why I had remarried a Thai man if

he couldn't accept my past. I couldn't change it [her past]. I felt as if I was nothing and worthless when I was with him. I decided to divorce again. (May, online interview, September 2011)

In addition to difficulties with her second husband, May encountered many negative reactions from family members, relatives, and friends, particularly after her second divorce. As May related to me, people around her often thought that there must be something wrong with her for two ex-husbands to abandon her:

My parents were concerned about my divorce. After I decided to separate from my first husband and told them, they didn't agree with my decision and thought how other people would view me as a failure. When I decided to marry my second husband, they couldn't accept it. They thought he was a single man who could find a single woman who was younger than me. Why did he choose to marry a divorced woman who had two children? My family always told me that he had married me because of my economic status. Anyway, I didn't believe them. I thought he was a good man because he looked after me so well before we married. So, after I had problems in my second marriage, I couldn't tell anybody. You know … I didn't exactly feel like a failure when the first marriage ended, but I certainly felt like that when I got a second divorce. It was a life-changing situation for me. I felt like I was worthless. I was valuable only as a sex object for men and was unworthy of respect. I thought my family and friends saw me as a big disappointment as a woman, someone who didn't deserve another chance and was selfish. They could not understand how I, an educated business woman with good interpersonal skills, could have ended relationships with two men. What was wrong with me? I was embarrassed at having my second marriage fail. (May, online interview, September 2011)

May had internalized cultural images and perceptions that reflected the stigma generally associated with divorce, sentiments that intensified after her second divorce. Specifically, May perceived herself to be a failure, someone who did not know how to be a good woman. Like other divorced women in Thai society, she was questioned about why she was not willing to sacrifice herself for her family. In Thai culture, women are always advised to tolerate the situation and accommodate themselves to it, with women's dedication to family idealized in the female code of social and sexual conduct. Thai tradition has defined *kulasatrii* (virtuous women) as the ideal Thai woman, one who is also proficient and sophisticated in household duties (Taywaditep et al. 2001). In contrast, divorced women

are viewed as selfish women who destroy the family ideal. Many divorced women must take the entire blame for the breakdown of their marriages. In spite of divorce becoming more common, it seems that it still carries some stigma in Thai society.

In addition to dedication to family, the concept of *kulasatrii* also includes being sexually conservative. It applies not only to divorced women who are in their 30s or 40s but also to young women. Min, a 22-year-old single mother, always saw herself as far from the ideal Thai woman because she lost her virginity and had a child when she was only 19 years old. Her ex-boyfriend left her when her daughter was one year old.

> I was a bad girl. I got pregnant with my ex-boyfriend while we were still young. I had to quit school after this. My parents couldn't accept it when I told them I got pregnant. They were disappointed and angry with me. Although they have looked after my child well since I gave birth, they always say that no man would want to marry me because I am not a good woman. This is especially true because I am a young, single mum. I got pregnant when I was a student. I know I don't fit the idea of *a kulasatrii*. It is not easy for Thai society to accept this [teenage out-of-wedlock pregnancy]. (Min, online interview, October 2011)

There is a notion among Thai men that a non-virginal woman, especially a young woman who has never been married, constitutes "damaged goods". According to a study by Knodel et al. (1996, 189), some Thai men expressed the view that women who have affairs while single would not make good spouses because premarital relationships are seen as significant indicators of how prone the woman might be to infidelity after marriage. Like many divorced Thai women, one difficulty faced by women with premarital sexual experience is that they are thought to be women filled with sexual desire. Some Thai men disrespect them but still court them for sex without commitment (Piayura 2012, 157). In response, many Thai women seek an escape from this negative stigma; they liberate themselves from restrictive gender scripts in Thailand through marriage to Western men. Integral to this response is the imagining of Western men as respectful.

Before entering into a relationship with a Western man, most of my participants had certain perceptions about sexuality in Western society. They thought that Western men did not pay as much attention to former partners or female virginity because women's celibacy before marriage was no longer considered important in Western culture. As May and Min explained:

I was twice-divorced with two teenage children. I thought it was difficult to find a Thai man. I didn't want to end up in that position [divorce] again. I married my second husband because I thought he could accept it, but I was wrong. I think many Thai men, especially highly educated, middle class men, are often pickier. They want women who are young, beautiful and have never been married before. My second husband is an example of a Thai man who look down on divorced women. When we fought, he always said that I was *Mae May* [a widow]. No other men would look at me or want me. So, my decision was to find a *farang* man who could accept and understand me. I thought *farang* wouldn't look down on divorced women. They don't care much about past sexual experiences and divorces. (May, online interview, September 2011)

I decided to search for a *farang* man because I thought *farang* are more responsible than Thai men. My ex-husband never provided any support for my daughter. My parents provide for her. But you know … I don't want to find a rich *farang* to take care of us [she and her daughter] because I don't experience any economic hardship. My parents' economic status is quite good. I just want someone who won't judge me for the mistake I made. You know … when I embarked on dating again with a Thai man after my ex-boyfriend left me, I felt like I was seen in a different way to a woman who was single, because he kept trying to put his arm around my waist many times. I think Thai men always think that a woman like me must be sex-starved and would welcome any attention. It is not easy to find a Thai man who can accept me as I am [a young, single mother]. Maybe he can accept me, but not his family. They might feel that I am an unsuitable choice for their son because I have a child out of wedlock. They might worry about that. So I thought why don't I try chatting. Maybe I can find a *farang* who will love me and my daughter. (Min, online interview, October 2011)

It seems that if we consider the motivations for cross-cultural relationships in terms of sexuality in Thai culture,[1] it is clear that some Thai women seek to marry Western men because they want to escape the social stigma associated with an earlier failed marriage or being a single mother. The imagination of respectable *farang* men attracts Thai women. The divorced women that I interviewed, from both high and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, reported negative experiences with Thai men, and they believed that Western men were more respectful and romantic than Thai men. They felt that marriage with a Western man might liberate them from the restrictions of Thai gender roles, and that Western men might not focus on their past as divorcees to hurt them. Moreover, such a marriage might represent an opportunity for them to once again feel valued.

Tosakul ([2010]), an anthropologist who studied transnational migration and cross-cultural marriages in Thailand, points out that some divorced women explained that remarriage with Western men is akin to "a miracle" because their body retains value and returns power to them. They never before realized that they have rights over their bodies and could make decisions in their previous relationships/marriages with Thai men. Therefore, marrying a Western man might be beneficial for these women because they could expose themselves to new ideas and practices relating to marriage, gender roles and sexuality in Western cultures. They could also liberate themselves from restrictive Thai gender roles and sexual mores.

Dreaming About Living Overseas: Affluence and Modernity

After I had applied to be a member of one dating site, I found Ying's profile. She described herself as an "easygoing, sincere, and kind woman who is seeking friendship and dating". I wrote a message to her and introduced myself as a Thai woman who did research about cross-cultural relationships. I did not expect a response from Ying because the site indicated that she was a user who selectively replied to messages. However, only three hours later, I received her reply. She expressed interest in talking to me and gave me her e-mail address. She told me that she had just quit her job and planned to apply for the Australian work and holiday visa to travel and work in Australia for one year.[2] She decided to talk to me because she wanted to know about living and working in Australia. She was wondering if it was possible for her to live and work overseas.

Ying was 26 years old and had finished her Bachelor's degree at a university in Northern Thailand. She had worked in an IT company in Bangkok for three years after she finished her degree in 2008. She decided to quit her job in 2011 because she felt like she worked many hours but she did not receive an adequate salary. She went back to live with her family in Northern Thailand while searching for a new job and an opportunity to work overseas. When I talked to her online, she asked me many questions about working in Australia. She told me that she had many friends working and studying in Australia. She wanted to go overseas, but it was difficult for her to do so. Her parents' income was enough to support her if she chose to study for a further degree in Thailand. However, they could not support her to study or travel overseas. She described her aspirations to me after we had chatted online for about a month:

> I have a dream to travel and study overseas. I know it is not easy. I don't come from a rich family. My family can't support me to do that. I must create this opportunity by myself. When I did my degree at the university, many of my friends went to the USA on a work and travel program for the summer. They paid more than 150,000 Baht [US $5,000] to apply for this program. It was a lot of money for my family. Although some friends could earn that money back when they worked there, my parents didn't want to lose their money … I worked for three years after finishing my degree and tried to save money to follow my dream. My salary wasn't bad when I compared it with some friends' salaries, but it was not enough to save because of the high cost of living in Bangkok. I had to pay rent and many other things on my own. That was why I decided to quit that job. I have been back in my hometown for the last two months, and now I am looking for a new job. Maybe my salary might be lower than before, but I feel I don't have many expenses here [her hometown] so I may be able to save some money and follow my dream. (Ying, online interview, July 2011)

Ying was attracted by the romantic ideas and stereotypes portrayed in the global media, which often illustrate scenes of technological advancements, luxurious lifestyles and the large, well-situated houses in Western society. She imagined that residing in a Western society was an opportunity to live a modern lifestyle and enjoy a higher economic status. Ying explained her ideas:

> My friends always post pictures of their travels on social networks. It made me really want to spend a few years traveling and living overseas. My preferred countries to live in are Australia, England, or the U.S.A. I know it is difficult to achieve this, but I want to at least try. I always search for stories of Thais who have moved to live abroad. I am interested in how they can secure a job. I think that by working abroad for one year, I could save more money than working here [Thailand]. My friend went to work in Australia. She told me that she got more than 100,000 Baht [US $2,857] each month. Here, I have to work the whole day long and can only earn 25,000 Baht [US $714] per month. Working abroad with a high income, I could travel to many places in the world. But working in Thailand, it is difficult to do that. (Ying, online interview, July 2011)

It seems that Ying's perception about living overseas does not differ from many other Thais who have never been overseas. They imagine that "Western" society is both affluent and modern. According to Appadurai (1996, 53–54), the media influences the lives and ambitions of people.

Fantasy is now a social practice which enters into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies. Thus, rather than accepting their lives as a matter of fate, people imagine other worlds and compare them with their own world. Their lives are no longer shaped solely by their local situation and experience but increasingly by scenarios that the media suggest are available. People's experiences of relating to locality within modernity are commonly associated with the emergence of new cultural sources of reference.

Moreover, this imagining is also reinforced by Thai social values, which view *yu mueang nok*[3] as a symbol of enhanced social mobility and privilege because going abroad is quite expensive for Thais and only the wealthy can afford to do so (Suksomboon 2009, 35). Moreover, their perceptions are also based on their own observations of foreign tourists in Thailand. The widening economic gap between nations and currency exchange rates can be an influential factor affecting Westerners' holidays in Thailand. Charoensri (2011) points out that some Western tourists seem to enjoy a different lifestyle when they are on holidays in Thailand. They can choose the best things during their trip, such as staying at luxury hotels, and having dinner at expensive restaurants whereas they might not be able to afford these things in their home countries.

These images seduce local people and feed their fantasies about living overseas. They assume that working and living abroad will offer the chance of a better lifestyle and access to the things that they desire. This is because local people see a vast number of tourists who spend weeks doing nothing but engaging in mass consumption. Local people are being presented with images of affluence that inspire their imagination and fill them with dreams of a better life (Beck-Gernsheim 2011). For Ying, who did not come from a poor family and had the ability to earn sufficient money to subsist in Thailand, it was an opportunity to live overseas and have new experiences that was most desirous. She was attracted by the social and economic advances on offer in Western societies. Ying focused on how it was difficult for her to advance economically if she stayed and worked in Thailand. Therefore, her desire to live and work overseas motivated her to turn to intermarriage dating sites in her search for a lifestyle change. Ying explained to me:

> My friend sent me the link to that website. I thought I had nothing to lose. I could practice and learn English from chatting anyway. It could be like lessons for which I didn't have to pay. So, I decided to join a dating site. I

didn't use it much when I worked because I didn't really look for someone. However, after I quit my job, I used it more often. I wanted to improve my English language. That is why I chose to talk to only men who were native English speakers. During the last two months I talked to many *farang*, but now I only chat to one Australian man. We talk to each other every night. Who knows, maybe one day I will get married and move overseas. (Ying, online interview, August 2011)

It seems that Ying's motivation for using an intermarriage dating site came from her perception that Western society presents more options for economic and social advancement, which was very alluring. Her understanding of Western society and her expectations about living overseas play a crucial role in motivating her to participate in an online dating site. Although Ying initially might not have thought about intimate relationships when she made a decision to apply to be a member of an intermarriage dating site, it seemed that she began to change her mind after she had chatted with an Australian man for two months. She started to think about the possibility of being in a relationship with him and imagined her future with him.[4]

Opportunities for Economic Security and Familial Financial Stability

The first time that I met Lek, she was online on a Thai dating site. I was interested in her profile because she had posted many photos of her and her child, and her marital status was "still married". I sent her an instant message to introduce myself as a Thai researcher who was doing research about love and relationships online. After she replied, we chatted on the dating site for about 30 minutes, and then she gave me her e-mail address. Lek told me that she did not generally use the dating site because she had to work and take care of her son. Lek was 29 years old and has a rural background. She was born in the Northeast of Thailand and migrated to Chonburi to search for employment when she was 20 years old in order to support herself and her family.

Lek had worked as a cashier in a department store. She met her Thai ex-husband at her workplace when she was 22 years old and got married 2 years later. When I started chatting with Lek in June 2011, she was not yet divorced, but the divorce was finalized three months later when her husband moved to live with a new wife. She was the sole person earning money to support her son. This was an important factor in her seeking

cross-cultural relationships. Lek always referred to her son when I asked her why she was looking for a Western man. She felt that economic security through a cross-cultural relationship would result in economic and social advancement for her son.

> I am here [dating site] looking for a chance to leave [Thailand]. I have been married for five years, but my husband has a second wife. He doesn't support me and my son. We are getting divorced soon. I want him to pay at least 10,000 Baht [US $333] per month to support us, but he refuses to do so. Hence, I still won't sign the divorce papers until we can reach an agreement. Anyway, I applied to be a member of this website four months ago after I found out that my husband had an affair with another woman. I just wanted to do something to show him that I didn't care about him. But now, I want to create a new opportunity for my son. If I have a new relationship, it could benefit my son. (Lek, online interview, June 2011)

After her divorce, Lek changed her marital status in her profile and began to search in earnest for a Western man who could accept her past as well as support her and her son. When I asked her why she searched for a Western husband who did not live in Thailand, she listed the potential beneficial living arrangements for a transnational couple:

> In my opinion, I think *farang* men are more responsible than Thai men. Even in the cases where the relationships have ended, *farang* will still support the children. Thai men don't do that. They only take care of themselves. I used to be proud when I finished my education at vocational school because most women in my hometown finished only primary or secondary school, and then they went to Bangkok, Pattaya or Phuket to search for a job. One of my old friends had to work in a beer bar in Pattaya[5] because she couldn't find another job and she had to take care of two kids. She then had some good luck. She married *farang* who was her customer and moved to live *mueang nok* [abroad]. I then realized that she is more successful than I am. She built a new home for her parents. Her children moved to live and study overseas. I want to see my son have an opportunity to grow up with a good education like that. I couldn't stand the idea of no future for my son. I also want to show my ex-husband that I can raise my son to have the good things in life without him. (Lek, online interview, November 2012)

According to Lek, the potential for improvements in both her economic status and her family's welfare represent her primary motivations in deciding to search for a cross-cultural relationship online. After the

divorce, her ex-husband was rarely involved in the upbringing of her child. Lek stated that her ex-husband did not see his son, not because she didn't allow it, but because he didn't want to. Some divorced women I interviewed, who had children from previous marriages, like Nong, Pui, and Nik, were in similar situations. Most of them, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, received no financial support from the fathers of their children. Although child support after a divorce is common in many Western countries, it is rare in Thailand. Fathers often find that running away from paying child support is easy because of weak law enforcement and the fact that much of the Thai economy is cash-based. In addition, after a divorce there is often little contact between the father and the family. Thus, negative marriage experiences with a Thai man and the images of a responsible *farang* man could both act to motivate these women to search for cross-cultural relationships.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, Lek came from a lower-middle-class background and had lived in communities in which cross-cultural marriage could be clearly observed. Her friend and some women from her village married Western men, thus representing "success stories", which provided a strong incentive for her to seek the same path. Many studies of Thai women's migration indicate that people in the community typically judge women's success based on material wealth. Many Thai women's positive opinions of Western husbands arise from their exposure to foreign cultures facilitated by transnational contacts with Thai women already married and living abroad (Charoensri 2011; Suksomboon 2009; Tosakul 2010). Thai women who migrate overseas always use wealth and material possessions to demonstrate their success when they return to Thailand. Moreover, some cross-cultural couples choose to live or retire in Thailand and so they then wield significant economic power living in an "endless mass consumption of luxury". Thus, these practices have reinforced the community's view about what constitutes prosperity (Chantavanich et al. 1999). The story of such "successful women" have encouraged many other women in communities to seek similar relationships on the basis of their perceptions about Western men being financially secure and making dependable husbands.

Diversity in Class, Education, Marital Status, and Personal Identity

Although the main purpose of turning to intermarriage dating sites is to find Western men, it is evident that these women are diverse in terms of

class, occupational and educational backgrounds, marital status, regional affiliations, and age. Local marriage constraints can motivate highly educated women in their late 30s or early 40s to pursue cross-cultural relationships online. Their choice of a partner is limited by Thai cultural norms of hypergamy, in which the women are expected to choose a spouse from a similar or higher economic and educational status. Therefore, highly educated women in their late 30s may face great difficulty in finding a suitable, local match. Marrying a Western man provides these women with an alternative, one which circumvents local marriage pressure because it allows the women to engage in upward geographical mobility, that is, moving from a less developed country like Thailand to a more developed country. Thus, among some women, the choice of the partner comes first and a chance of international migration comes later.

In the case of some divorced or separated women, particularly middle-class, educated women, cross-cultural relationships often constitute an instrument through which to negotiate Thai sexuality and gender roles. The stigma that is attached to divorced and separated women reduces their chance of remarrying a local man. Some women who have had negative experiences with a former Thai husband may consider marrying a Western man as an option that would allow them to create a new social life; it would also provide an escape from the pressure of kin and friends who comment negatively about their previous unsuccessful marriage. They may not prioritize the economic gain to be derived from cross-cultural relationships because their family does not face economic hardship. These women just hope to find a man with whom they can develop mutual affection. In contrast, other divorced or separated women, who come from rural and lower-class backgrounds, have to shoulder the burden of financial responsibility after their divorce. They may seek cross-cultural relationships due to expectations that such relationships might offer them a chance to have a better life. Marrying a Western man is seen as beneficial because they imagine it to be an opportunity to live with a responsible man and to earn an overseas income with which to support their families and children. Therefore, the chance to begin a new marital relationship and ease the burden of family responsibility may push women to seek and achieve cross-cultural relationships.

In the case of young, single women, opportunities for international migration and overseas employment, which would advance their social and economic standing, can be the primary reasons for turning to inter-marriage dating sites. Their fantasies about the affluence and modernity

of Western society, images that are reinforced by the global media and tourism in Thailand, motivate their decision to engage with intermarriage dating sites. In some cases, the high value placed by Thais on living overseas may also increase their motivation to seek international relationships. Living overseas is imagined as an opportunity to enjoy economic enhancement and a modern lifestyle.

The stories of the Thai women that I have discussed above challenge the view that women from developing countries are a homogeneous group who perceive cross-cultural relationships as a chance for economic gain and migration. Mahler and Pessar's (2001) concept of "gendered geographies of power" enhances our understanding of the diversity of women's backgrounds. Mahler and Pessar analyze the role of social location in influencing women's decisions and experiences of transnational practices. By social location, they refer to a "person's positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors" (Ibid., 445–446). Gender is not the sole axis that shapes and positions people. Multiple dimensions of identity also influence the ways that people think and act. The difference in the motivations of women in this book shows how gender operates simultaneously on different geographic scales. Educated women in their late 30s or early 40s thought that *farang* men would be less interested than Thai men in very young women because these women face greater difficulty in finding a suitable, local man than women in their 20s or early 30s. Similarly, rural and lower-class women must struggle with economic hardship more than women from middle or upper-class backgrounds. Their main motivations for seeking cross-cultural relationships tend to focus on the chance at a better life, more so than middle or upper-class women. They imagine marrying a Western man to be an opportunity to live with a responsible man. Hence, major areas of life, such as the family, education, age, class, and economy, must be taken into account because these determinants have a significant impact on women's perceptions and their decisions to pursue cross-cultural relationships online.

WOMEN'S REASONS FOR TURNING TO INTERMARRIAGE DATING SITES

Almost all of the Thai women interviewed sought cross-cultural relationships because they believed that Western men were different from local men, although these differences were variously defined. However,

searching for marriage partners from geographically distant parts of the world is generally limited by propinquity. In their search for partners, most women that I met had been restricted to their neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces. The opportunity to meet a Western man in their everyday lives was limited. Pla and Ran discussed their decisions to turn to intermarriage dating sites:

> I went to a dating site when I was 43 years old. I was hesitant to apply to be a member of the site. I thought that people should meet offline in order to establish a relationship. Anyway, I knew myself. I knew I liked *farang* and I was seeking a relationship with a *farang* man. How could I find him if I didn't use the Internet? My job is as a pharmacist in the hospital [in the North]. It is not the right place to search for *farang*, and I didn't like to go out because I thought I was too old to do that. I had no chance to meet *farang*. When I found the link to a dating site from one online community, I looked for a few weeks and thought about it, and then I decided to apply to be a member. (Pla, online interview, November 2011)
>
> I had lived alone in Bangkok for many years. I worked with a publishing company in Bangkok. I had to wake up at 5.00 am to get to work at 8.00 am and then I worked until 5.00 pm. When I returned home, I was too tired to go out at night. I just surfed the Internet and watched television at home. I was bored with my daily life. I wanted to find someone who cared about me, but I thought Thai men were not strong enough to look after women and their families. They only care about themselves. I wanted companionship, but I didn't want a Thai man. I asked myself, why didn't I try to search for *farang*. I often used the Internet because I was a member of an online community for book lovers. I had talked to some *farang* in that community, but it was only in friendship. So, I decided to apply to be a member of TLL [the name of a Thai intermarriage dating site] as I thought an intermarriage dating site was a good place to meet a *farang* who was looking for an intimate relationship with a Thai woman. (Ran, online interview, January 2012)

According to Pla, Ran, and other women that I interviewed, their desire to be in a cross-cultural relationship was not supported by local opportunities to meet Western men in their everyday lives. Most studies on how Thai women meet a foreign partner indicate that the tourism and entertainment industries are major areas through which Thai women and foreign men come into contact with each other (Charoensri 2011; Limanonda 2007; NESDB 2004; Suksomboon 2009). A survey study conducted by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB 2004) of 219 women in the Northeast region who married foreign husbands, found that

54 percent of these women met their spouses at their workplaces in tourism areas while 25 percent of the women met their husbands unintentionally when they were traveling to tourist spots. In a study that produced almost identical findings, Suksomboon (2009) interviewed 45 Thai women who had married Dutch men and found that 20 of the women had met their Dutch partners when they were working in the tourist and entertainment industries while four highly educated women had met their husbands when they were working in transnational companies.

However, such meetings were unlikely to occur with many women whom I met because they did not live or work in tourist areas nor did they often travel to these spots. Only two women in this book, Tay and Oam, had worked in tourism. Tay was working with a shipping company in Silom whereas Oam was a hotel receptionist in Bangkok. Even though they had chances to meet foreign men through work, they turned to inter-marriage dating sites to seek cross-cultural relationships. As Tay explained:

> There were some *farang* working with me, but most of them had Thai girl-friends. I thought it would be easy for them to find Thai women here. Some were not in a relationship, but they didn't look for Thai women. And I felt it might be strange if I was in a relationship with a colleague. It would be easier to meet *farang* on dating sites. They come to these sites to look for relationships with Thai women. So, I went there [an intermarriage dating site] to search for them. (Tay, face-to-face interview, February 2012)

Tay decided to use intermarriage dating sites even though she could meet Western men at her workplace or while traveling to tourist areas. While Ran did not have a chance to meet Western men in her everyday life, she thought it might be possible for her to meet them through online communities if she became a member. The pivotal reason for turning to inter-marriage websites for them was the range of available men. Intermarriage dating sites facilitate relationship formation and development by providing a meeting place with specific interests and goals (McKenna et al. 2002). Almost all members turn to such websites to search for intimacy and cross-cultural relationships. This is a significant feature of intermarriage dating sites, one which is not seen in other websites or via other methods. This particular characteristic can encourage women to make a decision to list themselves on the intermarriage dating sites.

In addition to the chance of meeting Western men in tourist areas or in the entertainment industry, some studies about cross-cultural marriage

also found that chain marriage migration is a further way in which to meet foreign partners. For example, Tosakul's (2010) study of one rural village in Northeastern Thailand showed that the majority of village women met their Western husbands through a circle of family and friends. The first woman to intermarry from this village married a Swiss man. A mother of two children, she went to work in Pattaya after divorcing her Thai husband. She met her Swiss husband while working in Pattaya and migrated to Switzerland. Three years after migrating, she opened a small Thai grocery store and later a Thai restaurant in Switzerland. After she settled overseas, she invited her siblings, nieces, and nephews to work in her grocery shop and restaurant. Most of her female relatives were subsequently married to Swiss men. After they married, those women in turn invited the families and friends of their husbands to visit their home village. Some men were attracted to the young village women and married them. Hence, this type of chain marriage migration represents one viable channel through which to meet Western men, as demonstrated in this rural village in the Northeast of Thailand (Tosakul 2010).

However, in the case of women I encountered, most had not lived in villages and none of their kin was involved in cross-cultural marriages. Only two women, App and Ning, had tried this channel before turning to intermarriage dating sites, but they failed in their attempt to initiate relationships because of the language barrier. App, a 28-year-old woman who had lived in Udon Thani, went on a date with an Australian man after her close friend who married an Australian man returned to her hometown and introduced her husband's friend to App. That was the first date for App with a Western man. As App said:

> My English was not good. I was too shy to speak in English with *farang*. When my friend introduced her husband's friend to me, it was difficult when we spent time together without my friend because I couldn't speak to him and didn't understand him. I felt that he was bored with me. Finally, he decided to choose another woman. So, I thought I should find *farang* from the Internet first. Maybe it was easier to talk online, and we could learn about each other before we met in person. That was why I went to a dating site. (App, online interview, January 2012)

Even though App knew a little English when she went on the first date, it was still difficult for her to communicate with her date in person. Her relationship with him could not develop because of a language

barrier. App decided to use an intermarriage dating site to search for a cross-cultural relationship online because she wanted to get to know some Western men online before meeting them in person or moving to another stage of the relationship. She thought it was simpler to learn about each other in that context due to the ease of communication and being able to translate the written words in her own time. She could share her feelings more easily in writing than by speaking.

Not only App but also other women in this book who lacked foreign language skills turned to intermarriage dating sites on account of that problem. According to McKenna et al. (2002), the Internet can be helpful for those people who have difficulty developing relationships in face-to-face situations. Although almost all of the women interviewed did not have personality problems, the language barrier could represent a significant challenge to forming relationships in face-to-face situations. Some women used intermarriage dating sites as a means of forming close and meaningful new relationships in a relatively non-threatening environment rather than turning to the Internet as a way of hiding from forming "real" relationships. They realized that language is very important for communication. While they were using intermarriage dating sites, they also had the opportunity to improve their language skills.

Intermarriage dating sites have, therefore, become an essential tool in seeking new cross-cultural relationships. With the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and increased accessibility of the Internet, almost all of the women interviewed perceived intermarriage websites as an important channel leading them to meet Western men. The interview data reflects how intermarriage dating sites appear to be displacing other ways of meeting foreign partners in the Internet era. However, the process of decision-making regarding pursuing cross-cultural relationships online is not an easy one. Most of the women interviewed had hesitated about listing themselves on intermarriage dating sites because searching for Western men in this way could at times be perceived as admitting they are not able to find a Thai husband or as "selling themselves for a better life". For example, as previously mentioned, Ping felt embarrassed and was reluctant to use intermarriage dating sites to look for a prospective partner. She had been thinking about it for several years before deciding to apply to be a member.

Additionally, some women hesitated before joining intermarriage dating sites because they had acquaintances or friends who had traumatic experiences while dating Western men online. Oam explained:

I had two friends who already used online dating. One friend finally succeeded in finding her *farang* boyfriend and she encouraged me to use it, but another friend failed in her attempt to find a relationship with *farang*. She met a *farang* who came to visit her in Thailand two weeks after meeting her online. In the second meeting, he told her she was perfect for him and asked her to travel with him. That was why I knew her story. She didn't tell me that she used a dating site. She just told me after she decided to spend time with him, thinking that she had found the right man for her. Unfortunately, when he went back to his country, he disappeared. He didn't answer her calls or return her emails. She was upset and couldn't believe it. I thought about her story [of being a "holiday girlfriend"][6] before I decided to use an intermarriage dating site. My friend was a beautiful woman, but she had bad luck. She chose and met the wrong *farang* man. I hoped I wouldn't meet a *farang* like that. (Oam, online interview, October 2011)

Oam's statement clearly demonstrates that she did not decide to pursue a cross-cultural relationship online without being aware of the negative possibilities of using intermarriage dating sites. However, she accounted for such bad experiences as "fate" or "luck", which made her hope that she might not have a bad experience like her friend.

In short, women's experiences here reflect the fact that rather than personality problems and/or economic pressures being primary motivators, these women turn to intermarriage dating sites motivated by an imagining of the attractiveness of Western men formed by confluences of global political economy, class, race, gender, and personal circumstances (Constable 2003). Intermarriage dating sites provide them a wider pool of potential Western partners than is usually available in their everyday lives. These sites have the explicit goal of connecting individuals with potential romantic partners (Heino et al. 2010). Therefore, although some women might be confronted by the dilemmas or problems of seeking cross-cultural relationships online, when they finally decide to become a member of intermarriage dating sites, they explain negative stories and stereotypes as personal issues, which they are able to avoid.

The stories of the women in this book reflect the reality that women use intermarriage dating sites in ways that open new opportunities in their search for intimacy, romance, and love across culture and distance. Rather than turning to such sites without realizing the negative stories and stereotypes, these women interpret them in terms of love and destiny. They hope that the decisions that they make could represent turning points in their lives, leading them to meet "the right Western man" and

create successful romantic relationships. But how do women represent their desires for love when they enter the field of intermarriage markets? Moreover, how do Western men perceive Thai women, and how do intermarriage websites portray them? What are the relations between women's self-representations and the perceptions of the Other? In the next chapter, I shift attention to explore the representations of Thai women in intermarriage markets. In particular, I examine how women's self-representations are formed in dialogue with the perceptions of Western men; these images are then featured on intermarriage websites in women's online dating profiles.

NOTES

1. Because of the embedded differences relating to gender and sexuality in Thai and Western culture, it is important in cross-cultural relationships to explore women's ideas about permission for pleasure and the importance of sexuality in intimate relationships. This theme will be examined further in Chap. 5.
2. This work and holiday visa is designed for young people aged 18–30 who want to travel and work for up to 12 months in Australia. This visa allows them to supplement the cost of their holiday through periods of temporary or casual employment. See more details in Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2012).
3. The term *yu mueang nok* literally means living abroad, especially in the developed countries of Europe, America, and Australia.
4. I examine the development of online intimacy in Chaps. 4–6. In the case of Ying, I started to interview her online in June 2011 and met her in person in February 2012. At the time of the interviews between June 2011 and January 2012, she was still talking online with Gavin, an Australian man. They met each other in person in February 2012, but the relationship had completely ended by April 2012 after Gavin returned to Australia.
5. Pattaya is a city in Thailand that has a reputation as a popular tourist spot. This city was also the site for GIs' holidays during Vietnam War, and it was later transformed into a popular tourist destination for sexual entertainment and services after the withdrawal of American troops. See more details in Chap. 3.
6. Three women in this book experienced being "holiday girlfriends". See more details in Chap. 6.

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Marketing and Love: Representations of Thai Women on the Intermarriage Market

> I finished my Master's degree in nursing. I was searching for *farang*, but I wasn't looking for money. I was searching for a genuine relationship and love. That was why I wrote on my profile if they were looking for sex only, please do not contact me. I wasn't a naughty bar girl. I was a traditional Thai woman. I didn't engage in casual sex without a commitment. (Jin, face-to-face interview, January 2012)

The previous chapter demonstrates that, with the increased accessibility of the Internet, intermarriage dating sites are emerging as important channels for women in Thailand to meet foreign partners, including Western men. Such websites have become essential tools for seeking new cross-cultural relationships and allowing women to consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. However, rather than focus on this enhanced capacity for choice, it seems that the most common discourse about cyberspace and its role in fostering cross-cultural relationships concerns its role in supporting the commodification of women in developing countries (Cabrera 2007, 55). Several studies claim that intermarriage websites have transformed the mail-order bride business and facilitated the sex industry, promoting the commodification and sexualization of women as well as contributing to human trafficking (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Lee 1998; Lloyd 2000; Zabyelina 2009).

Angeles and Sunanta (2007), for example, suggest that the representations of Thai and Filipino women on six intermarriage websites reflect the packaging of women as products in the business of selling brides. One

slogan from an intermarriage website, "Exotic Love at Your Fingertips", is discussed as indicative of a colonial worldview in constructing Asian women as objects of "exotic love" and as the "desirable Other". Western men are argued to have the power to define and imagine Asian women as the "Other", in opposition to modern Western women. At the same time, Western women are depicted as domineering and nagging, against a presentation of Asian women as passive, traditional, family-oriented, and feminine. According to Angeles and Sunanta (2007), Asian women are viewed on the intermarriage websites through the colonial male gaze. For example, Thailand has become a signifier for sexuality, so Thai women are portrayed as sex workers. The Philippines, in contrast, is a signifier for domestic workers, hence Filipina women are seen as helpers and wives. Targeting Western male viewers, the websites are based on the construction of Thai and Filipino women as the sexual and racial Other. The representation of Asian women in cyberspace thus seems to perpetuate unequal power relations based on race, class, and gender.

"At your fingertips" likewise implies the power of Western men over Asian women, whom they can choose then purchase easily and quickly with new technologies. Angeles and Sunanta (2007) argue that the digital media thereby intensifies male power and agency. When the mail-order bride business uses cyberspace as a new tool to disseminate its services, the interactive nature of digital media gives male customers more power in selecting their prospective brides. By just clicking a button on the websites, Western men can view, select and order contact addresses of Asian women. Women are categorized by age groups and regions and presented as marketable objects. Cyberspace, from the perspective of Angeles and Sunanta, makes the process easy and convenient for male customers.

In a similar study, Zabyelina (2009) explores the visual content of 24 mail-order bride websites that advertise Eastern European brides. She demonstrates how intermarriage agencies offer their subscribers a variety of services to assist them in meeting the mail-order brides of their choice. These services can be found in abundance on the Internet where the brides in the catalogues clearly tend to be oriented toward pleasing and enticing the men. The entire industry is based on recruiting women who are ready to fulfill customers' expectations and requests. The marketing of these websites is based on sexual and ethnic stereotypes, the domination by men, and the realization of men's demands and desires.

Since the so-called mail-order bride catalogues began to be published and easily accessible online, many studies on cross-cultural relationships

and cyberspace have pointed to newly intensified patterns of commodification of women in cyberspace (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Lee 1998; Lloyd 2000; Zabyelina 2009). These studies offer important insights into ongoing contemporary inequalities, but they reflect only one side of the intermarriage websites. Their arguments are often built on assumptions about the passivity of Third World women and tend to reduce intermarriage websites to a variant of the mail-order bride business. For example, Angeles and Sunanta (2007) use the terms "mail-order bride agencies" and "intermarriage agencies" interchangeably throughout their discussion. Yet, most of these studies only examine one form of an intermarriage website: those in which women do not directly contact Western men on their own behalf. Instead, each stage of the relationship is arranged by the agency.

These mail-order bride or dating agency websites are different in significant ways from the intermarriage dating sites that I examine in this book. According to Orloff and Sarangapani (2007, 472), the scope of services between intermarriage dating agencies and online dating services is dramatically different. While intermarriage dating agencies retain control over the disclosure and use of the woman's personal biographic information to target their male customers, online dating sites tend to charge and treat male and female clients equally. Women are not recruited and marketed to male clients. Both women and men can apply and pay to be members of the dating sites and access special tools. The sites provide only the communication tools to make meeting over the Internet easier, and do not extend their services to include features such as creating women's online profiles, translating communications, or arranging trips to introduce foreign men to local women.

Drawing on this idea of the distinction between intermarriage dating sites and intermarriage dating agencies, raises questions about individual agency in intermarriage dating sites. In the previous chapter, I made the point that women do not make decisions to pursue a cross-cultural relationship online without being aware of the stereotypes associated with using intermarriage dating sites. Most women perceive and yet simultaneously deny such stereotypes as applicable to them. Thus, rather than exploring and listing the various types of intermarriage websites, my focus in this chapter is to examine the representations and self-representations of women on intermarriage dating sites. The key questions in this chapter are as follows: How do Thai women represent themselves in their online dating profiles? How do others (intermarriage dating sites, intermarriage dating agencies, and Western men) perceive and represent Thai women?

What is the relationship between the self-representations of women and the perceptions of others? Are the ideals of so-called mail-order brides still reflected in these representations? How are these representations related to political economy and gender inequality?

My argument here is that when women enter the field of intermarriage dating sites, they are being socialized into the specific rules and norms of that particular social space. In this process, women have to deal with the ambiguities and contradictions that arise from the normative and practical tensions between love and the presentation of self for the market (Droge and Voirol 2011). Although women always state that they are searching for intimacy and an exclusive love relationship, they are still confronted with innumerable competitors in an anonymous market environment in which they must assert themselves. The way that women represent themselves on intermarriage dating sites is always transformed into a packaged product competing with others in an open-ended market regulated by the law of supply and demand (Illouz 2007). Because of this, women's self-representations in intermarriage dating profiles must obviously deal with the positive and negative stereotypes of Thai women in intermarriage markets, rather than their own desire for love and intimacy.

The chapter begins with a review of the change in practices and attitudes toward cross-cultural relationships in Thailand from the past to the present day. Given long-standing patterns of interaction between Thai women and Western men, a brief description of this history gives insight into how such relationships relate to the processes of history, political economy, and globalization. The second section examines a visual content analysis of intermarriage dating sites that advertise Thai dating. It shows how intermarriage websites operate and represent Thai women as girlfriends and brides, and then compares the differences in marketing strategies between intermarriage dating sites and intermarriage dating agencies. In the third section, I examine the ideas and perceptions of Western men who use intermarriage websites to search online for Thai women. I demonstrate how Western men's perceptions about Thai women still reproduce some aspects of past stereotypes. Depictions of "submissive, feminine and traditional wives" and images of "manipulative and calculating women" clearly influence the encounters between Western men and Thai women. The final section focuses on women's self-representations when composing their own profiles on intermarriage dating sites. This discussion shows that, although women can create Internet-based profiles providing information

about themselves, their self-representations are in many ways similar to the stereotypes of traditional wives that have been promoted on intermarriage dating agencies and in the so-called mail-order bride industry. It appears that these women calculate that by doing so, they will be able to achieve their goal of initiating relationships with Western men.

The History of Cross-cultural Relationships in Thailand

Limanonda (2007), a Thai sociologist who studied cross-cultural relationships in Thailand, argues that such relationships have evolved dynamically in relation to the country's historical environment. She divides cross-cultural relationships in Thailand into three periods. The first period began when a high number of Chinese migrated to the country. The second occurred when Thailand went through the processes of modernization and globalization after World War II. The third period occurred when cross-cultural relationships and marriages became a new social phenomenon that is now clearly observable in modern Thailand and has resulted in large-scale marriage migration.

In the initial period, Thailand began to develop closer contacts with other countries. The number of people practicing exogamous marriages began to rise after Chinese traders and labor migrants settled in the country. At that time, the Chinese were the most common spouses for Thais. Marriage to Westerners was also practiced, but it was confined to royalty and the higher classes, who had the opportunity to study abroad and make contact with Western people. Between 1918 and 1924, some male students, who received government scholarships to study abroad, requested permission to marry Western women (Limanonda 2007, 85). In this first period, most Thais who married Westerners were male because the privilege of education at that time was confined to men (Charoensri 2011, 80).

Cross-cultural relationships in Thailand changed significantly after World War II. Thailand went through rapid processes of modernization and globalization while the tourism and entertainment industries emerged as key opportunities for Thais to meet Westerners. The emergence of the tourist industry in Thailand was inextricably linked to two major phenomena: first, the influx of American troops into the country during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the 1970s; and second, the Thai government's strategy to promote tourism as a means to earn foreign exchange from the 1980s (Suksomboon 2009).

During the Vietnam War, Thailand served as a major destination for the Rest and Recreation (R&R) holidays of American servicemen (GIs). The influx of GIs into the country began with about 500 in 1962 and this number reached 400,000 at its peak (Shulich 2009, 106). Many of these GIs had a short break for recreation in Pattaya or they stayed in the military camps in the Northeastern region of Thailand. This was one of the most important determinants that generated the growth of the sex and entertainment industries in Thailand (Limanonda 2007, 86). The demand for sexual entertainment and services by GIs brought new forms of commercial sex services into Thailand, such as the go-go bars, sex shows, and massage parlors. Some Thai women engaged in the sex industry or in escort services. Many of them became *mia chao* (a rented wife)[1] who lived with GIs and provided them with sexual, emotional, and housekeeping services. In return, the women were entitled to financial support during the time that they were together (Shulich 2009).

After the withdrawal of American troops at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, some women moved out to live abroad with their GI spouses while others, who had been former *mia chao* or had engaged in sex services, migrated to Pattaya or other cities for work in the expanding sphere of sex-related tourism (Suksomboon 2009). The reputation of Thailand as a place where Western men could easily find sexual services, combined with the government's backing, meant that the tourist industry grew rapidly following the Vietnam War. According to the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT), the number of tourists increased from 634,000 in 1971 to 1,098,000 in 1976, and it reached more than 1.5 million by 1979 (Cohen 1996, 252). The increased opportunities for Thais to meet Westerners through the tourist industry changed the pattern of cross-cultural marriage in Thailand. During this second period, some Thai women from the lower classes began to marry Western men after meeting them while working in the tourist and sex industries. The numbers of Thai women marrying Westerners was much higher than that of Thai men doing likewise (Charoensri 2011).

However, the relationships between these Thai women and their Western partners were not well accepted among Thais. Lower-class women who married Western men tended to be viewed by society in a negative manner. Such women were labeled as "not being good women". The stigma of being a *mia farang* (a Westerner's wife), in terms of lower-class women, was often linked to sex workers or *mia chao*. In contrast, women from higher classes were not treated negatively because their cross-cultural

marriages were seen as a sign of being educated abroad and having the ability to speak foreign languages (Limanonda 2007, 86–87). This stigma has endured well into the twenty-first century when cross-cultural relationships emerged as a more common form of migration.

In the third period, due to growth in global connectivity, cross-cultural relationships between Thai women and Western men increased. Such relationships are clearly observable and are at the root of large-scale marriage migration. Despite the scarcity of overall statistics on cross-cultural marriages, existing research on this phenomenon shows an increasing trend in relationships between Thai women and Western men, especially in the Northeastern region. According to a survey conducted by NESDB (2004), the number of cross-cultural marriages between Northeastern Thai women and Western men between 2003 and 2004 was as high as 19,594. It was also reported that as many as one-third of families in some villages in this region had female members married to Western husbands. For example, in her ethnography, Tosakul (2010, 186) described the process of marriage migration in one district in Northeast Thailand between 2004 and 2005 and stated that there were 95 village women (almost one-third of the total 330 women) aged between 20 and 59 years who were married to Western men. This village has earned the new informal name of *Muu Baan Swiss* (Swiss village) because 96 percent of this group of women married Swiss men after meeting their foreign husbands through a common circle of family or friends.

Such marriages have brought about a process of migration that can involve either "marrying out" when women go to settle down abroad or "marrying in" when foreign husbands move to settle in Thailand, or alternately, the couples travel back and forth between countries (Limanonda 2007). The obvious change that resulted from this marriage migration is the economic improvement of the area. It is evident in the real estate projects and construction businesses in some provinces in the Northeastern region that have developed. In addition, a survey of NESDB on this phenomenon also shows an estimated 122 million Baht [US $4.06 million] a month or 1,464 million Baht [US $48.8 million] on average in remittances to Thailand from Thai wives of Western men (NESDB 2004).

This NESDB study primarily focuses on the significant contribution to the country's economy by cross-cultural marriages. It shows that intermarriage couples do not just bring in currency to the country, but they also have the potential to be trade and cultural representatives, generating additional income to Thailand. Thai women, who return to their

domiciles, tend to initiate some development in their own villages. In this way, these Thai women can play constructive roles in some development programs. For example, they can help promote local handicraft industries initiated under the One *Tambon* (Village) One Product (OTOP) project and regional tourism. Therefore, it is not surprising that cross-cultural relationships have been recognized by the Thai state as an important source of national income. Both the community and policy makers seem to embrace the financial benefits that accompany these couples.

The growth in economic benefits is an important key to the lessening of the social stigma attached to being a *mia farang*. Marrying a Western husband is increasingly viewed as a legitimate path to life-long happiness due to the success stories of many women who have followed that course. In some provinces in the Northeastern region, ceremonies are organized to welcome cross-cultural married couples. For example, in Khon Kaen province, where there was the highest number of foreign husbands, there was a special festival held in 2003 in which hundreds of cross-cultural couples participated (Limanonda 2007, 113). In Udon Thani, a province with about 2,200 foreign in-laws, an annual *Hom Pa Lang* festival (literally: shared supper festival) is organized specifically for these couples (Charoensri 2011, 83). Moreover, there are the *Mia Farang* Clubs, which are meeting places for women in many districts in the Northeastern region, Pattaya, and on the Internet who have Western husbands.

Not surprisingly, cross-cultural relationships have been most notable among women in Thailand. A new marriage market emerged after the influx of foreign men to Thailand, and recently, it has shifted to become a marriage market that is likely to favor some Thai women. The trend of marrying Western men has extended from being practiced by a small group of women, who have the opportunity to meet foreigners through work or study abroad or by being engaged in the tourist industry, to being widely practiced by women from all socioeconomic statuses. The emergence of intermarriage websites shows that cross-cultural relationships are increasingly favored in Thailand (Esara 2009, 13). The Internet has extended existing opportunities for meeting potential partners across space. However, scholarly attention to cross-cultural relationships in cyberspace remains largely focused on the form of mail-order bride or intermarriage agencies. Therefore, in the following section, I examine two different types of intermarriage websites: the intermarriage dating sites and intermarriage dating agencies, demonstrating the differences in marketing strategies of each type.

Representations of Thai Women on Intermarriage Websites

The primary goal of this section is to reflect on new marketing strategies employed by intermarriage dating sites using technology to enhance their customer relations rather than advertising Thai women as being "good wives". I compare five different types of intermarriage dating sites by exploring their visual content, which advertises Thai women as friends, girlfriends, or brides. These websites[2] were chosen from a Google search using the term, "Thai dating". The content of the websites, including text, visual images, links, and advertisements, is analyzed and compared with the content of intermarriage agencies or mail-order brides websites in the research by Angeles and Sunanta (2007) and Zabyelina (2009).

As Smith (2005) argues, several online dating companies have developed a customized business strategy. Instead of trying to match all customers with prospective partners, online dating companies create specialist websites, which focus on varying aspects of each customer's desires, such as geographic boundaries, certain ethnic or national groups, or specialized interests. The customers can define their preferences in selecting different websites before looking for intimate relationships.

Intermarriage dating sites are one segment of larger online dating businesses. For example, the Cupid Media Network owns and operates over 35 interactive and unique dating websites, including Thaicupid.com, a site that targets men who want to find Thai women for both short and long-term relationships. From the first page of the website, customers can follow a link to all of the Cupid Media Network websites. This network offers a specialized dating service to a diverse group of individuals based on their preferences in ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, location, and special interests. The Cupid Media Network proudly claims on its website that their customers are offered "2 sites for African dating, 8 sites for Asian dating, 6 sites for Latin dating, 3 sites for European dating, 2 sites for gay and lesbian dating, 2 sites for religious dating, 8 sites for country specific dating, and 4 sites for special interests".[3]

Using target categories, some intermarriage dating sites encourage the consumer to preselect ethnicity or nationality according to their preferences, without confronting them with their racial prejudices with regard to other groups. The sites emphasize their ability to offer efficient tools that make online dating easily accessible, globally attainable, confidential, and highly visual. For example, the first page of Thaicupid.com (2016)

invites customers to find their matches with three simple steps: create a profile, browse the photographs, and then start communicating. In contrast to the intermarriage agencies, these sites do not seek to make claims about Thai women as "traditional women" or as "more desirable".

Other intermarriage dating sites take a similar approach in advertising and promoting their websites as a new way to search for intimate relationships. On the first page of Thaifriendly.com and Thaiforlove.com, for instance, the texts emphasize that the websites are not mail-order bride agencies that provide limited choices for contacting women. They explicitly state that they do not interview the women who are members of the websites. Rather, they simply offer the customers convenient search tools that are supposed to make the search for the most suitable partners easy and fast. The large number of members and their ability to reach people from different parts of the world are used to support their claim that they are the best intermarriage dating site. For example, Thaifriendly.com (2016) claims more than 832,467 members, while Thailovelines.com (2016) boasts members from 193 different countries.

The websites further emphasize that they are concerned about safety, security, and privacy. Although they do not interview members of their sites, they investigate and approve all profiles before loading them. For example, the first page of Farangdate.com (2016) identifies some measures instituted to protect customers' privacy and safety. The site claims that members can report any suspicious profiles. They will investigate and remove scammers and spammers from their sites. Intermarriage dating sites also state that they possess the ability to provide appropriate matches based on their efficient tools, but they do not guarantee or offer any services to assist customers to meet their prospective spouses. In other words, intermarriage dating sites claim that customers can access many personal profiles thereby increasing the pool of possible partners. The websites open up new avenues for the romance market. People are no longer restricted to finding partners in their local areas, but can search for prospective companions from other parts of the world with their affordable, convenient, and reliable matchmaking services. The matching systems provide results that must be viewed as a starting point only, and the communication tools on the websites provide channels to pursue relationships.

In contrast, intermarriage agency websites offer their customers various services to proceed to the next step of actually corresponding with the women they have chosen. Zabyelina (2009) explored 24 intermarriage agency websites and found that such websites offer their male subscribers

a variety of services to assist them in meeting the brides of their choice. Each of the women is given a personal number and their profiles are always created by the agencies. Such profiles usually include photos and personal details such as name, age, physical details, qualifications, and interests. Western men are offered convenient search tools that make their search for the most suitable bride easy and fast. On these websites, the agencies direct their efforts toward attracting potential male consumers. For a fee charged to the male consumers, the agencies facilitate international communication with female recruits and provide a special offer to their customers. If Western men are interested in particular women, they can click an "add to cart" button; the price will come up to inform the customer how many women they have in their carts and how much they cost. The process of meeting women through intermarriage agency websites is based on a "marriage intermediary". It is portrayed as a process with three simple steps, "browse, select, proceed to checkout", similar to that of any other online shopping business.

After searching, men who are interested in a particular woman will be asked to subscribe either to the site or to the catalogue and pay a fee for each potential bride. If men hesitate about which woman they should choose, there are other available options, such as paying a lump sum for several contacts or paying for a subscription fee for a set period of time. After male subscribers have paid the registration or access fee, they can contact the women whom they have chosen via e-mail, online chatting, and video-calling. The websites usually offer translation and interpretation services, which are paid for by male subscribers. Moreover, when Western men decide to meet the women, the websites will organize a "bridal tour" of the women's country to meet a selection of women who are ready to marry or date (Zabyelina 2009, 98–99). In addition, some websites also provide varying degrees of services such as the mailing addresses and phone numbers of women, additional biographical information, visa and immigration consultation, and even letter writing on behalf of the male client or women (Angeles and Sunanta 2007, 23).

The intermarriage agency websites feature women in colorful multimedia designed to reach a wide audience at low cost; they also provide search tools for male customers to define and narrow down their preferences. Online services of intermarriage agencies allow Western men to shop for women anywhere, anytime, easily, and quickly. The websites are based on the dominant position of Western men and the realization of their demands. Thus, women and men on these sites are placed in unequal

positions of power. Men are likely to be active viewers and potential customers, while women are always presented as passive, eroticized, and sexualized objects to be looked at (Ibid., 16). Intermarriage agencies and male consumers, rather than female recruits, retain control over the disclosure and use of the woman's personal biographic information. Women are clearly oriented toward pleasing the men, and agencies are likely to recruit only those women who are ready to fulfill men's expectations and requests (Zabyelina 2009, 100).

Moreover, there are differences between the representation of Thai women on intermarriage dating sites and intermarriage agencies. Angeles and Sunanta (2007, 14) pointed out that marketing advertisements by intermarriage agencies are likely to be based on sexual, racial, and ethnic stereotypes. Most intermarriage agency websites appear to use the anticipated male gaze as their major guiding strategy by focusing on images of women who look feminine and traditional. For example, the advertisement on MyThaiBride.com, which was created by a local company in Thailand, makes explicit suggestions that Thai women are uniquely attractive and inherently possess the qualities of a "good wife" (cited in Angeles and Sunanta 2007, 14). The website clearly describes the Thai women as "traditional girls" to convince Western men that they are making the right choice, drawing on ideas of Asian women as "exotic love" or the "desirable Other" (Constable 2003). The women are advertised as being more submissive, more feminine, and more traditional wives in implicit contrast to the alternative, that is, modern Western women, who are viewed as being overly aggressive, demanding, and liberal.

Angeles and Sunanta (2007, 14) also argue that the content and pictures on intermarriage agency websites clearly tend to be oriented toward pleasing Western men by using the language of tourism. On MyThaiBride.com, for example, pictures of Thai women are juxtaposed with the images of beautiful scenery, temples, and classical Thai art. The words such as dream, exotic, beautiful, oriental, legendary, and elegant are usually used to describe both the country and Thai women. Such words reproduce the constructed association between women and national culture and female objectification.

Unlike intermarriage agencies, intermarriage dating sites allow both Thai women and Western men to search and locate the exact qualities in prospective partners that they seek. Although the main target customers of the intermarriage dating sites are still Western men, the representation of Thai women is barely visible on these dating sites. Almost all the

websites examined in this book advertise by focusing on their innovative tools rather than representing or constructing Thai women as superior marriage partners. This may well be because there is an underlying assumption within these websites that the Western men have already selected the nationality of the women; as Thaiforlove.com (2016) states on its website: "Everyone here at ThaiForLove understands Thai dating". The key strategy of intermarriage dating sites, therefore, is to differentiate their own sites from online dating competitors. The main page emphasizes matching systems and communication tools to show that they can offer a better-quality service than their competitors. In other words, intermarriage dating sites try to demonstrate that they have the ability to provide appropriate matches and tools to pursue cross-cultural relationships. However, both the Western men and the Thai women who turn to these sites must create their personal profiles by answering questions from a mandatory survey; they must also provide more detailed information about themselves to attract others.

The distinctions between intermarriage dating "agencies" and intermarriage dating "sites" raise questions about women's agency in the intermarriage marketplace. How do women represent themselves when they enter the field of intermarriage dating sites? Before moving on to this question of self-representation in online dating profiles, in the following section, I explore what motivates Western men to decide to choose and search online for Thai women, and what perceptions these men hold regarding images of Thai women. The aim of the following discussion is to consider the ways in which Thai women are represented by Western men and how this dynamic likely influences women's self-representation.

Images of Thai Women Through Western Men's Perceptions

Prior to collecting data on Western men, I assumed that it would be relatively easy to initiate contact and conduct e-mail interviews with Western men as I only wanted to ask them two or three questions about their experiences and their perceptions of Thai women and intermarriage dating sites. However, after conducting fieldwork on intermarriage dating sites, I realized that my assumption was not entirely accurate. Although I had clearly introduced myself in my profile as a researcher who was studying cross-cultural relationships between Thai women and Western men, I cannot discount that one of my identities is a Thai woman. All

my profile details clearly informed any potential participants about my research. Some Western men made contact and bombarded me with many questions: why did I choose to study this topic, where was I staying, and from which part of Thailand did I originate? They also wondered about my marital status and my true goal for using intermarriage dating sites. For example, Christian left this message after he read my profile: "I wonder if you also want to look for love or marriage. I really want to meet a Thai woman. If you are a Thai woman, I would like to know a little of your background".

In response to his misunderstanding, I replied to him saying that I was sorry if I confused him. I was not looking for someone to be my partner. I was a researcher who was studying online relationships. I was looking for someone who could be a participant in my research and asked him if he would like to share his opinions and experiences about intermarriage dating online. Christian then replied that he just wanted clarification, and then he expressed interest in helping me complete my research. However, most Western men did not answer after my initial response. This may be because intermarriage dating sites are designed to facilitate interactions between potentially romantic partners. They focus specifically on people seeking cross-cultural relationships across distances. Moreover, in some cases, although they agreed to be my participants, they still needed some proof of my identity. For example, Tom chose to send his consent to my university e-mail account, although he received information about my research and the consent form from my Hotmail account; likewise, Dan asked me to translate some Thai sentences into English before granting me an interview.

My experiences of such situations raised questions about my position and identity in this research project. Being a Thai woman had an immense impact on my access to the data. Some men initiated contact with me because they were interested in Thai language and culture, and they sometimes asked me to translate Thai scripts that their Thai girlfriends or friends sent them or posted in online profiles. Nevertheless, in some situations I found that my identity as a Thai woman overshadowed my identity as a researcher. For instance, one man tried to use webcam to chat with me after he replied that he could not compose an e-mail to answer my questions. He wanted me to interview him through web chat. When I interviewed him on MSN, he asked me many questions about my personal life and tried to use the webcam to see my face. After I did not accept his request, the interview was discontinued, possibly because he prioritized

my identity as a Thai woman over that of a researcher. Thus, my own multiple identity categories were an influential factor affecting the interview data and the relationships between researcher and participants, depending on how they defined and perceived me.

Interestingly, in some cases, Western men who initiated contact with me did not read my profile before sending me their first message. For example, I received a message from a man who just wrote, "I need you", and then gave me his contact number. After I replied via his profile that I was a researcher who was studying cross-cultural relationships and asked him to be my participant, I received no further correspondence from him. This may be due to a range of reasons motivating Western men to turn to Thai intermarriage dating sites to look for Thai women, some of which include cybersex or holiday girlfriends. Online dating sites are not only limited to a search for love and intimacy, but they are also about finding sexual partners (Whitty 2007). However, these men's true motivations are difficult to ascertain in discussions because they tend to refuse to disclose these matters to researchers in order to keep their lives private.

The data that I discuss below is derived from ten Western men. Over a period of two months, these men wrote and shared their experiences and perceptions about Thai women and intermarriage dating sites via e-mail interviews. The interviews were conducted in English, although two men did not use English as their first language. I did not correct or change any mistakes or grammatical errors when quoting from these interviews because I wanted to preserve the integrity of these men's sentiments.

Western Men's Reasons for Seeking Thai Women Online

Numerous quotes on the Internet, in the popular media, and in published sources suggest that Western men, who are looking for Third world or Asian women, want malleable wives who can fulfill their needs and desires (Constable 2003). For example, a study by Glodava and Richard (1994, 29) described such men as "losers" who aim to control foreign women because they have been rejected by Western women. These men can be attracted to the intermarriage market to search for foreign brides. However, the data acquired during my research demonstrates that almost all Western men who replied to me did not fit the image of "losers" in their home countries. Some of them were highly educated and had professional jobs. All had been to Thailand and had selected that nationality before they decided to pursue a cross-cultural relationship online.

This discussion considers what Western men say about their experiences and perceptions of Thai women in order to understand what facilitates Western men's decisions to search for romance with Thai women online. It illustrates the complexity of their motivations, which exceeds the somewhat simplistic explanation of "loser Western men" who seek submissive, traditional wives. This section aims to answer the following questions: Are Western men searching for traditional and submissive women? If so, why do they specify Thai women in their online search? What are their perceptions about the differences between Thai women and other Asian nationalities, for example, between Filipinas and Chinese women? What are their perceptions concerning the differences between Thai women and Western women?

The Fantasy of Being on Holiday
Some Western men whom I interviewed felt attracted to the country and to Thai women after they had holidayed in Thailand. For example, Tom, a 40-year-old engineer from Australia, went to Thailand for the first time after he divorced his Australian wife. He explained his decision to pursue a relationship with a Thai woman online as follows:

> I have been to Thailand once a year for the past 6 years and feel an attraction to Thai people in general. I have been divorced for 7 years and I guess I just don't want to get involved with an Australian woman again and have to go through all the drama and headaches that can happen. I have met Thai women on my holiday in Thailand of different ages and employment. I really enjoyed interacting with them so I guess looking online was the next step to maybe meet someone to firstly get to know then see how things work out. I am open to meeting either here [Australia] or in Thailand. (Tom, e-mail interview, July 2011)

According to Tom, intermarriage dating sites provide opportunities to initiate contact with Thai women after returning to his own country. His interest in Thai women was directly influenced by tourism in Thailand. Suksomboon (2009) claims that the popularity of tourism to Thailand is one of the major reasons for expanded opportunities for contact and later marriage between Thai women and Western men. In her study, one Dutch man, who had traveled to Thailand many times, commented that when some Dutch men go to Thailand for the first time, it would be easy to fall in love with Thai women who work in the sex entertainment industry. This might be because these women take care of him and pay him plenty of attention. It could make him feel special.

As Bishop and Robinson (1998) argue, Thai women in the sex industries are thought to be playful and cheerful, as well as naturally and culturally sensual. The line between the professional and personal in terms of sexual services in Thailand is not clearly demarcated. Namely, in Thailand's sex tourism sector, Western men pay a "bar fee" to take women out and then they negotiate directly with the women for further services. This might include a relatively long-term companionship during their holiday. The women may provide Western men with additional services, such as being their tour guides, cooks, sexual partners, and sometimes even careers. Thus, in Thailand, the overlap between sexual transactions and romance associated with sexual services can result in Western men believing that caring for them is an inherent cultural trait in Thai women.

Although the Western men I interviewed did not pursue relationships with Thai women who they had met on holiday in Thailand, it seems that they also imagine Thai women as having happy and pleasant personalities. As Tom said:

> The women I have met in Thailand seem to want to please you all the time and nothing is too much of a drama/problem, whereas Australian women seem to want to please themselves first then whoever comes next. Thai women have a gentle nature. Australian women want many material things (big beautiful houses, jewelry, cars, clothes, holidays etc.) and seem stressed working and bringing up children. I have found my interest in Australian/Western women decrease a lot since I started to go to Thailand. (Tom, e-mail interview, July 2011)

Tom had never met any Thai women in his own country nor had he ever been in a relationship with a Thai woman. He had only his holiday experiences in Thailand. The women who he met on holiday would take care of him and pay him plenty of attention. This would give him an expectation of physical and emotional care from any prospective Thai wife. His story is typical of many other Western men with whom I spoke, in that they typically decided to seek cross-cultural relationships with Thai women after visiting Thailand. For example, Carl also found himself attracted to Thai women after a three-week holiday in Thailand:

> I must say that on my holiday to Thailand, I found the ladies to be very lovely and honest. Easy to speak to although I couldn't speak any Thai and they had "broken" English. I found myself "liking" Thai ladies. I would like to date and hopefully marry a Thai lady. However, I am not sure of "where

to meet", and so I applied and maintained an "on and off" membership of Thai dating site in the hope that when I go to Thailand again I may have made more friends, and possibly have a connection to a special lady to look at hopefully dating and if the feelings are mutual, then to hopefully marry one day. So unless I find about a place in Melbourne where it is easy to meet Thai ladies and get to know them, the internet it has to be for now. (Carl, e-mail interview, June 2011)

Charoensri (2011, 86–88), who studied marriage migration between Thai women and English men, suggested that cross-cultural relationships between Thais and Westerners related closely to tourism. Her study presents the stories of 40 Thai women who migrated to become wives of Englishmen. She found that 30 couples in her study planned to spend their lives in Thailand after the husband's retirement. Suda, one of Charoensri's informants, described the difference in her husband's emotions and behavior in each place. When he was in Thailand, everything for him had to be the best that he could afford, such as staying at the luxury hotels and having dinner at the best restaurants. In contrast, in his everyday life in England he concentrated on work and was always stressed.

Charoensri analyzed the story of Suda's husband and some Western men in her study by using Goffman's (1963) notion of "situational propriety" of place. Goffman (1963, 24) points out that places have their own expectations, and certain forms of interaction are considered appropriate in one place, but not in others. Some Western men in her study identify Thailand as the "leisure world" where anything can happen, and they have the fantasy of being on holiday forever. This imagination is caused by the widening economic gap between nations, the advantage of currency exchange rates, and mass media images of Thailand as a (sexual) tourist paradise. As a result of this fantasy, many Western men decide to search for romance in Thailand (Charoensri 2011, 86) and hope to live in the "endless mass consumption of luxury".

Although Western men in my study did not state that they planned to spend the rest of their lives in Thailand, they did attach meaning to the place. The opportunity to have a holiday in Thailand and the feeling of being a special person were significant factors that motivated them to pursue relationships online with Thai women. As Paul said:

After I went to Thailand many times, I like there more and more. Everybody is happy and friendly. First time that I went to Thailand because my friend got married with Thai women, and I follow him to Thailand. I have been

to Thailand 7 times in my life and stay for 6 weeks to 2 months visa. I have been many places there, and I have met many Thai women. I am pretty sure that I do want to marry to Thai. I think the Thai ladies are so wonderful about everything and always make me happy and good company. (Paul, e-mail interview, July 2011)

Thus, it seems that Western men's holiday experiences make the idea of "traditional Thai women" more practical and imaginable than ever. Most of the Western men whom I interviewed assumed that Thai women inherently had good values, were honest, and dedicated to their families. This probably made them turn to intermarriage dating sites to search for Thai women.

Experience with a Former Thai Partner
In addition to the expectations attached to place, some Western men decide to search online for Thai women because they had formerly been in a relationship with a Thai partner and they felt comfortable with the culture. Dan, who had worked in Thailand for four years, said:

I used to live in Thailand 15 years ago. In that time, I had a Thai girlfriend. For a variety of reasons, we did not continue the relationship. I then left Thailand and came back to Australia. Since coming back I found that I was just not attracted anymore to Western women. I am more attracted to Asian women. Whether they are Thai Japanese, Korean, Filipino does not seem to matter, they are all more attractive to me. As for Thai women in particular, because of my previous stay in the country I think I am just being sensible and directing my "efforts" to something that is more familiar to me. In that I understand a bit about the culture and background. Picking another race would involve me learning and understanding another culture. That is why I am searching for Thai women. (Dan, e-mail interview, June 2011)

According to Dan, the physical features of Asian women constituted the primary reason behind him seeking cross-cultural relationships online. Although he perceived no physical differences between Thai and other Asian women, he decided to turn to Thai dating sites because he didn't want to learn a new culture. As he said, "I am going back to what I am used to".

George, who met his ex-fiancé during his holiday in Thailand, had a similar attitude. His ex-fiancé had been working in a beer bar in Pattaya. He kept in touch with her after he returned to Australia. He visited her

again in Thailand and brought her back to Australia. However, the relationship broke up after they had lived together for a while. After the relationship ended, his ex-fiancé returned to Thailand whereas George continued learning Thai and looking for a Thai woman online. He outlined his reasons for searching for a Thai woman as follows:

> A man such as myself does hope that a Thai woman does all the duties of a traditional woman – basic duties such as cooking and cleaning. These attitudes of looking after a man are hard to find in this day and age among *farang* women. This is mainly because they have a different culture. I believe *farang* women, in today's society, are not brought up to look after their man as well as a Thai woman can. Therefore, *farangs* such as myself, look at other cultures for a compatible wife. And if you asked why Thai and not another Asian culture, I would have to say that my wife does not necessarily have to be Thai but I would prefer if she was. My ex-fiancé was Thai and I have gotten used to the culture. I know Thailand is a country which is very livable for the average *farang*. If I had a Cambodian wife, I believe living in a country like Cambodia would be a little more difficult as I would not be able to access all the things I want from a Western culture. Therefore I would prefer a Thai wife. (George, e-mail interview, July 2011)

His motivation for seeking a Thai wife was not only because George wanted a traditional wife but also because of the meaning that he attached to the place. George had been in Thailand many times and had been in a relationship with his Thai ex-fiancé. This made him more familiar with Thai women as opposed to other Asian women, prompting his decision to search for a Thai partner. However, his experiences with his Thai ex-fiancé also made him realize the importance of the social and economic background of his prospective partner. He did emphasize his concerns about this and therefore, he decided to turn to Thai intermarriage dating sites to seek a highly educated Thai woman from a middle-class family. He said:

> I am looking for a Thai woman online because it is probably the easiest way to meet a Thai woman. There is much more variety of women to meet. I therefore believe the internet would be the easiest way to seek a Thai wife, particularly if you lived outside of Thailand. It also gives you access to Thai women away from the tourist areas of Thailand, as the women in these areas would most likely not make a great wife because they always look for money. (George, e-mail interview, July 2011)

It seems that George still intended to establish a relationship with a Thai woman while emphasizing his concerns about social class and the educational level of his potential spouse. He decided to turn to an intermarriage dating site because he did not get a chance to meet Thai women in any other way. When he had been in Thailand on his holiday, he always spent time in tourist areas and met only women who were working in the tourist and entertainment industries. With the increased accessibility of the Internet, intermarriage dating sites have become tools through which to enhance opportunities to reach and establish relationships with Thai women from other areas.

The interview data illustrates that most Western men have already selected the nationality of women that they desire before pursuing cross-cultural relationships online. Intermarriage dating sites are the online tools that allow them to gain access to prospective Thai partners from home. This is related to the marketing strategy of intermarriage dating sites, which assume that Western men know what they want. Rather than comparing Thai women with other Asian/Western women or representing Thai women as "traditional wives", intermarriage dating sites tend to emphasize the matching systems and communication tools that differentiate their own sites from Thai intermarriage dating competitors and the mail-order bride industries. However, almost all of the Western men interviewed still articulated images of "traditional Thai women" and still unfavorably compared these images with "modern Western women". The following section details the men's perceptions about Thai women to illustrate why the image of "a traditional woman" continues to be reproduced in intermarriage markets.

Western Men's Perceptions of Thai Women

Almost all of the Western men interviewed mentioned the phrase "traditional women" in their motivations for seeking Thai women. They represented Thai women as submissive and feminine, as women who would be traditional wives in contrast to the Other, that is, modern Western women who they viewed as "too liberal" and "more demanding". The images of a traditional woman still played a key role in motivating them to search for these qualities, as Dan and Christian explained:

I think Thai women are more subservient to men. They take on a "traditional role" of being a wife. Thai women know how to cook! My sister is the

only Western woman who really knows how to cook. I used to work with women in Thailand who had very good jobs and a career but still managed to be female. That is something I think Western women have lost. Thais have, in my mind, found a balance or have just retained the ability to be female. (Dan, e-mail interview, June 2011)

Western and Thai women are totally different. It is because Thai culture and Western culture are very different. Thai culture is more of a group culture, whereas Western culture is more about the individual. A big difference is that Western women are more independent. I found that Thai women continue to try to always please the man in so many ways, and I don't think a Western woman is as affectionate as a Thai woman. (Christian, e-mail interview, June 2011)

According to Constable (2003), Western notions of Asian countries as "Third world" or "developing" contribute to the belief that Asian women are more traditional and less influenced by feminism. Almost all of the men interviewed perceived Asian women to be more devoted to marriage and the family than Western women. They expressed strong views about both Western women and Thai women, stating that they would seek Asian or Thai wives because women in their own countries were too independent and did not care for their husbands and children seriously enough. In contrast, they perceived Thai women as caring and sincere about family relationships.

These views can be linked to what Robinson (2007, 487) describes as a consequence of the decline of patriarchalism and the erosion of "father rights" in Western society. Robinson argues that in the case of Australian men, changes in women's social power as a consequence of feminism, the 1975 introduction of "no fault" divorce, and the success of women in winning custody disputes for children of failed marriages all act to erode "father rights". The desire by Western men for Asian wives expresses nostalgia for an imagined perfect world of the past where women were not spoiled by exposure to Western ways or women's movements. Looking for Asian women can be constructed as a substitute for that which Western men have lost in the emancipation of Western women and society. As Carl noted:

I think the main difference between Thai women and Western women is the cultural background … in Western culture, the women are "success driven", wanting to climb the corporate ladder, whereas Thai ladies, are still of the old fashioned ideology of the 40's – 50's … wanting to have a family, and be the loving and doting wife and mother. (Carl, e-mail interview, June 2011)

The mass media images of traditional Asian women that are embedded in world economic disparities, sexist ideologists, colonialism, and globalization, have partly influenced Western men's decisions to pursue cross-cultural relationships. However, it should be stressed that Western men's motivations in seeking Thai women are not shaped purely by the images of traditional Asian women but are also inspired by the fantasy of being on holiday and Western men's prior experiences with Thai women. As previously noted, almost all of the Western men interviewed had traveled to Thailand before turning to Thai intermarriage dating sites. These experiences instilled an attachment to the place and produced a greater sense of familiarity with Thai women as opposed to other Asian women. These sentiments in turn prompted them to turn to intermarriage dating sites to seek Thai women specifically.

Thus, although some Western men experienced failed relationships or disastrous marriages with Thai women, they still desired Thai women, explaining the failed relationships as "destiny" that led them to the wrong person. For example, Ken had been in a relationship with a Thai woman for two years. He met his ex-girlfriend in a nightclub in Bangkok when traveling in 2008. He kept in touch with her after returning to his country and visited her again in 2009. After the second meeting, they began a relationship. He was living with her in Thailand for two months in 2010. When he returned to his country, he sent her 20,000 Baht a month to support her and her family. The relationship ended after he found that she still went out at night with her friends and spent his money on her own entertainment. As he related:

> My ex-girlfriend is Thai. Although my previous relationship to a Thai girl was not successful, I still like Thai women. I think I just met the wrong person!!! We broke up because she lost my trust. I was living there with her for 2 months. She was good. She looked after me and her son very well when we spent time together. But when I came back here to work and made money. What happened was I was working hard, making money, and supporting her and the family [her son and her parents]. She didn't have any respect for what I was doing and didn't appreciate it. My money was being spent on silly things, going out drinking, and so on. It didn't make me happy, especially when there was no money for the future. (Ken, e-mail interview, June 2011)

Ken's experience was similar to that of George, mentioned above. Both George and Ken turned to intermarriage dating sites because they wanted to search for an employed or educated woman who would still fulfill a

traditional role. Previous experiences with Thai ex-girlfriends made them cautious about "gold diggers" and they were concerned about social class and the educational level of their potential spouse. George, Ken and other men I interviewed realized that they were looking for a traditional relationship. At the same time, they were searching for Thai women who did not focus on money. As Irvin commented:

> Basically, I like Thai women (and like most Thai people). I think there are many good things about Thai culture. For example, I like the politeness of Thai culture and the way Thai people show respect, particularly to older people. I also like that Thai people are generally happy and positive most of the time. I always feel good to be around Thai people. One thing I don't really like about Thai culture is the focus on money. It seems to be a very big thing to a lot of Thai people, even people who are not poor. I look forward to meeting some Thai people who don't talk about money. (Irvin, e-mail interview, July 2011)

It is clear that Western men's perceptions about Thai women in the context of international marriage still reproduce some stereotypes. The depictions of Thai women as feminine and being traditional wives are clearly taken into consideration by Western men. Moreover, the pictures of "manipulative and calculating women" are also evident in Western men's perceptions. Some Western men have images of Thai women as women who are ready to take advantage of Western men of a higher economic standing in order to improve their own lives, especially women from the lower classes. Although Western men may not perceive the socioeconomic background of their prospective partners to be a major hindrance to a relationship, they do take it into account. This is particularly the case with Western men who have previous failed experiences with Thai partners or wives. Some men turn to intermarriage dating sites to search for "middle-class" women who they assume have more "familiarity" or receptivity to Western culture than lower-class women do.

Self-representations of Thai Women on Intermarriage Dating Sites

The previous sections discussed the ways in which others represent Thai women. In this section, I explore how these women represent themselves in the intermarriage market in their online dating profiles. According to

Boyd and Heer (2006), personal profiles have become a common mechanism for representing Self and identity online. With the popularity of intermarriage dating services, women's profiles can be an important tool with which to introduce oneself and initiate relationships with Western men. They need not be introduced through a third party and in fact, they can feel more comfortable interacting with Western men whom they have never met with in person (Zhao 2005). Such sites allow women to create Internet-based profiles of themselves describing their physical appearance, demographic characteristics, individual values and needs, and personal history. Women can represent themselves using a wide range of multimedia tools, such as text-based descriptions and photographs, in ways that they may not ordinarily represent themselves to other members of society (Yurchisin et al. 2005). Thus, the aim of this discussion is to examine how these Thai women represent themselves in order to attract the attention of Western men. What do they see as desirable attributes when representing themselves in intermarriage markets? How are these representations linked to stereotypes of mail-order brides and perceptions held by Western men?

I am a Traditional Woman: Women's Strategies for Presenting Themselves

Women's self-representations in their dating profiles are especially important in terms of initiating relationships because these profiles must make a good first impression and be appealing to Western men. The data acquired during my research demonstrate that almost all women who used intermarriage dating sites directly managed their self-representation by negotiating stereotypes about Thai women in the international marriage market. Women often advertised themselves on their profiles with phrases like "a traditional woman". For these women, a traditional woman is described as one who "takes care of family", is "loyal", "sincere", "conservative", "nice", and "respectable".[4]

Such advertisements emphasized images that are consistent with stereotypes of traditional Asian women. As Jagger (2001) pointed out, many advertisements on dating sites articulate a commitment to tradition in the norms of female attractiveness that they reproduce. Women's self-representations are directed to a recognizable imagined community of men, so it would be difficult to imagine them departing from this image. As explained in the previous section, Western men whom I interviewed perceived Asian or Thai women to be more devoted to marriage

and family than Western women. They expressed strong views that they would look for Thai wives because women in their own countries were too independent and did not adequately look after their husbands and children. In contrast, they perceived Thai women to be caring and sincere about family relationships. Their perceptions placed the supposedly "modern and liberated" Western woman in opposition to the so-called "traditional" Asian woman.

The stereotypical perceptions about traditional Asian women held by Western men are also expressed by Thai women themselves. Almost all of the women interviewed assumed that these "traditional femininities" were positive traits in intermarriage markets. As Tay, who was working with Western men in a shipping company, commented:

> In my opinion, I think *farang* men search for Thai women because they want a woman who can take care of them and the family. My two colleagues [Western men] have been in a relationship with Thai girlfriends. They always say their girlfriends take very good care of them and compare their Thai girlfriends with their ex *farang* girlfriends who didn't care much about them. (Tay, face-to-face interview, January 2012)

At the time of interview, Tay was in a relationship with Tim, an American man. She did not delete her online dating profile, but she "froze" her profile on the search engine. When we talked, I asked to see her profile and found that it was not different to that of many other Thai women. As she wrote in her profile:[5]

> I am really looking and finding for a man who will truly love me as I will do the same. I am not looking for a perfect one. But I am looking for the one who can give the real love and happiness to me. When we meet and I know you are my true love. I hope to spend my whole life with you. If you are looking for a nice and sincere woman who love to take care of you and want to have a happy family, please contact me. (Tay's profile, January 2012)

According to Tay's profile, she emphasized that she was a woman who could take care of a family. This might be because she believed that traditional feminine qualities were the traits that Western men sought. Thus, for Tay, presenting herself as "traditional" seemed to represent the best strategy for attracting Western men. In this way, her self-representations on intermarriage dating profiles act to "fix" stereotypes of the traditional woman and rely upon a specific imagining of Thai women by Western men.

I am Brainy and Educated: Women's Denial of the "Gold Digger" Label

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when Asian or Third World women turn to intermarriage websites to search for cross-cultural relationships, the most common assumption is that their principal motivation is economic. The glaring economic disparity between the countries is often identified as the primary incentive. This assumption overlooks the diversity that exists between the women. Some Thai women who pursue cross-cultural relationships online are highly educated. Such women always stress love and the romantic angle in their profiles; they also refer to their good economic position in Thailand. The words "career", "smart", "highly educated", "good family", "reputation" and "well-off" are frequently used to describe themselves on online dating profiles.

Advertisements that focus on "the educated and respectable woman" demonstrate the necessity of negotiating stereotypes of mail-order brides as "gold diggers". The content in some women's profiles aims to communicate that the women do not experience any economic difficulties that might push them into seeking cross-cultural relationships. Essentially, they are assurances from the women to the Western men that they are nice, decent Thai women. They are searching for cross-cultural relationships online to find true love, not for economic reasons. The romantic motivation for their decision to search online was always demonstrated through a comparison with lower-class Thai women. As Ping recalled:

> When I created my profile, I wrote that I came there [an intermarriage dating site] to find love and good man who will love me and only me. I was a high educated women who search for genuine relationships, not for money. I had a good job and I had my own money. I just wanted to be happy and had someone to love and to be loved. (Ping, online interview, December 2011)

Ping tried to represent herself in her dating profile as a decent and reputable woman. She was a good woman with a respectable job and a high income. Through this rhetoric, she sought to present herself in opposition to the image of shrewd women who look for Western men to take advantage of in order to improve their economic lives (Constable 2003). This does not differ greatly from many highly educated women in my interviews. They always spoke of two categories of Thai women: the ones who were seeking cross-cultural relationships because of love, and those who

were primarily driven by economic reasons. Most of them tried to show that their motivations were definitely not a case of seeking a wealthier life and tried to dissociate themselves from lower-class Thai women who searched for Western men to escape poverty.

I am not a Bar Girl: Women's Denial of the Infamous Sex Tourism Industries

Because of the infamy of sex tourism in Thailand, some women's profiles seem to base their advertisements on the good girl-bad girl dichotomy and present themselves as traditional women who observe conservative, moral codes of sexual conduct. Thus, it would appear that the meaning of "a traditional woman" for Thai women is not only expressed in the dichotomous "modern"/"traditional" models of womanhood but also in the opposition between the "respectable, conservative woman" and the "loose, bar girl". Many women I interviewed stressed that they did not enjoy casual relationships. They were seeking a long-term relationship. As Jin told me:

> In my opinion, I think some *farang* men are just looking for sex or holiday girlfriends because Thailand is a popular sexual tourist destination. When I used intermarriage dating sites, I was very scared I would meet a guy who was finding a holiday girlfriend or only looking for sex. I tried to show them I was different from that. I finished my Master's degree in nursing. I was searching for *farang*, but I wasn't looking for money. I was searching for a genuine relationship and love. That was why I wrote on my profile if they were looking for sex only, please do not contact me. I wasn't a naughty bar girl. I was a traditional Thai woman. I didn't engage in casual sex without a commitment. (Jin, face-to-face interview, January 2012)

For some women, representing themselves in opposition to promiscuous bar girls and prostitutes is not only a rejection of Thailand's infamous sex tourism industries, but it also addresses the stigma of being a lower-class *mia farang* in Thai society. As Jin clearly stated, "I was different from that. I finished my Master's degree in nursing … I wasn't a naughty bar girl". She tried to distinguish herself from the images of promiscuous bar girls by underlining her social class and education. As mentioned earlier, lower-class Thai women who are in a relationship with Western men are often deemed to be "bar girls" or *mia chao*, whereas women from the higher classes are not treated so negatively. Higher class women's cross-

cultural relationships are seen as a sign of being educated and having the ability to speak foreign languages (Limanonda 2007). Because of this, many Thai women involved in intermarriage dating sites tend to base their profiles on the good woman-bad girl dichotomy. They try to draw a clear line between "good, middle-class, educated women" and "bad, lower-class bar girls" in their profiles in order to negotiate the popular stigma of being *mia farang* against a background of Thailand's infamous sex tourism industries.

In conclusion, at present, the key strategy of intermarriage dating sites is to differentiate their own sites from online dating competitors by emphasizing the matching systems and communication tools more than advertising the qualities of Thai women themselves. Women who turn to these sites have to create their personal profiles by answering questions from a mandatory survey and providing detailed personal information. Women's profiles have become an important tool to advertise themselves in their efforts to attract Western men who constitute the chief target of such representations. Thus, the ways that women construct themselves appear to be based on their beliefs and stereotypes about Western men's preferences. Almost all of the women interviewed assumed that Western men seek traditional Thai women who can, and will, take good care of their families. These men would look for Thai wives because they perceive that Thai women are more caring and sincere about family relationships than women in their own countries. In this way, women's self-representations tend to fix and confirm the stereotypes of "feminine and traditional Thai women" that are viewed as positive qualities in the intermarriage market. Furthermore, some women present themselves as "educated and professional women" and underline their good economic standing in Thailand. Such images seem to be constructed to distinguish themselves from the stereotype of conniving, shrewd women who selfishly seek a better life for themselves through taking advantage of Western men.

However, it should be stressed that women's self-representations are dynamic, a process that is related to specific social situations and stages of their relationships. Sometimes, the women I interviewed described themselves as women who sought more equal relationships, while at other times, they stressed their traditional female characteristics. Thus, the Self that women represented on their dating profiles is not necessarily an independent fixed entity. As Schlenker (2003) argues, the presentations of Self are not purely an expression of the Self, but they reflect a transaction between Self and an audience in a particular social context. This is a

dynamic reflection of the actor's self-concept and beliefs about their audience's preferences. Representing themselves on intermarriage dating sites is only the first stage in pursuing cross-cultural relationships with Western men. There is still pressure on women to adhere to the stereotypes of being traditional women to target Western men. Therefore, although intermarriage dating sites allow women to self-represent and distance themselves from stereotypes of mail-order brides, the way that women construct themselves is not vastly different from the advertisements by mail-order bride industries that represent Thai women as traditional. This may well be because both the women and the intermarriage agencies focus on Western men as a primary target and attempt to convince them that they made the right choice.

This pattern demonstrates that when women enter the field of intermarriage dating sites, they simultaneously confront the specific rules and norms of that particular social space. The process of searching for a partner through an intermarriage dating site is a conjunction of intense subjectivism and the objectivization of the encounter through technology and through the market strategies of the sites (Illouz 2007). Intermarriage dating sites place women in a market in open competition with others. These women then must deal with the ambiguities and contradictions that arise from the normative and practical tensions between love and the market environment. As a form of advertising, women tend to highlight their desired features in intermarriage markets to maximize their chances of being selected by Western men. Because of this, the ways in which women represent themselves are still clearly derived from stereotypes of Thai women in intermarriage markets; this strategy is pursued in order to attract Western men who seek a traditional woman.

In short, although intermarriage dating sites tend to focus on matching systems and communication tools more than the qualities of Thai women, discourses about Thai women as "feminine and traditional women" still pervade intermarriage markets. This is especially prevalent in Western men's perceptions and in women's self-representations. Consequently, women who turn to intermarriage dating sites continued to be considered commodities. Therefore, love as the basis of relationships is often subdued and undermined in these marketplaces. This is fertile ground for further examination in the next chapter. Do notions of love appear in the formation and development of cross-cultural relationships online? How do women experience and explain love in online relationships, and how does this compare to offline relationships?

Notes

1. *Mia chao* literally means "a rented wife". During the Vietnam War, this word was used to refer to relationships with American servicemen in which Thai women would provide wifely duties in exchange for money (Shulich 2009, 105). Later, the definition of *mia chao* gradually changed to mean the temporary relationships between local Thai women and foreign male tourists or traveling businessmen. In these relationships, the foreign men hire local female partners to accompany them during their trips in Thailand. These men pay all the women's expenses and may also provide them with some extra money (Suksomboon 2009, 29).

2. These sites were accessed on March 20, 2016. The contents of these websites may change, and not all of these may still be available online. The analysis focuses on the first two search results pages, which may still be visible to Internet users.

3. http://www.cupidmedia.com/en/services (accessed 20 March 2016).

4. Most of my participants had not used intermarriage dating sites since they met their partners, so they could only recall and provide information about their practices by commenting on what they remembered had and had not worked with their profiles. To supplement this data, I then examined some public profiles of Thai women appearing on intermarriage dating sites between late 2012 and mid-2013. These profiles were publicly indexed and searchable via a Google search engine and could be viewed and accessed by casual visitors. This visual data is only used to confirm the interview data, particularly concerning the presence and composition of personal profiles on intermarriage dating sites.

5. The data collected from women's profiles have not been edited or changed although there were some grammar or spelling mistakes in order to represent women as they presented themselves.

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Why Him? Becoming Online Daters

I had been there [intermarriage dating sites] about three years before I met my husband. I had spoken with many *farang* men online, but only with some men did I keep talking and trying to get to know them online. I met only one Aussie man and William [her husband] in person. The Aussie man was the first *farang* I met in person. I didn't talk to him much online. He contacted me only one week before he came here [Thailand]. I met him for three to four hours at a restaurant near his hotel, and for the following two days he was in Phuket. I felt nothing for him. I thought he was just looking for someone to take care of him while he was in Bangkok. Maybe he met another girl after I left the restaurant. But for my husband, I fell in love with him even before I met him in person. It was different to the Aussie man, because we talked [online] every day for three months after we met on a dating site. We got to know each other more and more when we talked. I felt like I knew him well, and could trust him. He always sent me messages and told me what he was doing during the day. And when we chatted on Webcam, I felt like the physical distance between us was bridged although he was there [Sweden] and I was here. (Na, online interview, November 2011)

Internet relationships, especially those involving Thai women and Western men, are typically perceived as problematic. This might be due to popular myths about cross-cultural relationships in particular and online relationships in general. When relationships are Internet-based, they are commonly assumed not to be genuine and full of danger because of the

anonymity of online interactions (Saroca 2012). Some people treat online intimacy as virtual play, which may encourage dishonesty among online lovers (Danet 2001). Selective self-presentation and outright deception can lead to the creation of false or inaccurate impressions, and to offline heartbreak when the real offline person is encountered (Albright and Conran 2003). Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, sexist and racist stereotyping of Thai women is still pervasive. Popular discourse still promotes the notion that Thai women are insincere in their relationships with Western men in that they only seek to improve their economic status. Nevertheless, romantic love as the basis of relationships and marriages is commonly related in popular discourses.

However, the interview quoted above challenges these two stereotypes. Na had been involved in intermarriage dating sites and pursued online communications there for three years. Although she had met some Western men, they were just looking for a holiday girlfriend. However, Na's online experiences with her husband show how courtship between Thai women and Western men might develop in the online world. Online intermarriage dating sites are used to initiate cross-cultural relationships and typically involve communicating and screening potential partners across cultural and national boundaries prior to meeting in person. Na and other women interviewed used the Internet to seek and develop their online relationships with Western men in ways that were meaningful to them.

In this chapter, I illustrate how intimacy between Thai women and Western men takes place online and how these interactions are interpreted by people who may have different emotional repertoires and expectations about what constitutes trust, intimacy, and love. Specifically, the chapter highlights how cross-cultural relationships are initiated and developed in an online space and how they compare with offline relationships. What I argue here is that, although cross-cultural relationships are initiated on intermarriage dating sites and are developed in online contexts, such relationships also share some commonalities with other intimate relationships established offline. The rules and rituals of love and intimacy are not so different from those that exist offline, although they do differ in terms of the initial mode of meeting. Online couples who seek long-term commitments such as marriage also feel "chemistry" and express "romance" when they establish romantic relationships in cyberspace.

The chapter provides an overview of the typical steps in online relationships. First, women have to choose whether to subscribe or not, and if they decide to subscribe to such sites, then they must complete an online profile

survey. At this point, women decide about what criteria are important to them. They use elaborate strategies to screen and filter their potential partners, and they may limit their correspondence with Western men to those few with their preferred characteristics, such as nationality, social class, ethnicity, education, age, and physical appearance. However, the selection criteria can change over time. Thus, the first section of this chapter examines women's selection criteria and their preferences in partners in the online intermarriage market. The chapter then moves on to illustrate the sequencing of the processes of communication from initial evaluation of online personal profiles to the first tentative expressions of interest through to spending time together, all via the use of online communication tools.

Marketable Characteristics: The First Stage of an Online Relationship

The important difference between women who advertise themselves on intermarriage dating sites and other women looking for companions is that they are trying to expand their pool of eligible partners across national borders. They explicitly seek cross-cultural relationships, so the strategies and preferences of these women may be more complex than is described in accounts of proximate or local online dating. That is, it is not only social class, education, age, or physical appearance that are important in initiating relationships, but national and cultural identities are also integral to the selection process.

Many women whom I interviewed pursued cross-cultural relationships by using the matching tools on intermarriage dating sites to gain access to Western men's profiles. They then initiated contact by leaving a short message on those profiles. For example, Chan found John's profile through a search specifying educational and age criteria. When John's profile came up, she was attracted to his profile photo and details. She decided to leave a message to introduce herself and told him what she was looking for. He wrote back and they started communicating online.

Like local online dating sites, intermarriage dating sites provide a huge virtual romantic shopping mall and increase the available pool for women and men who are seeking their "ideal match" (Albright and Conran 2003). As mentioned in Chap. 3, in the first stage of online relationships, both men and women joining intermarriage dating sites must create their personal profiles by answering questions from a mandatory survey and then providing even more detailed information about themselves. The survey

includes questions about their demographic, socioeconomic, and physical characteristics, such as their age, gender, marital status, education level, income, height, and weight. In addition, there are some questions about their motivations for joining the site and what they are looking for. For example, members have to indicate their intentions about the following: whether they are searching for friendships, dating, a serious relationship, or marriage; whether they are willing to relocate; and whether they have children and/or want children. All the questions in the survey are either numeric or multiple choice, which online dating sites use to match people (Hitsch et al. 2010). Moreover, members can also include one or more photos as well as provide more details about their personality, lifestyles, and ideal partners in their personal profiles.

Once registered, personal profiles are an important visual tool for women and men to assess and find a prospective partner with characteristics that they believe will fulfill their own relationship needs and desires (Tsunokai et al. 2009). An immense number of potential partners can be screened and evaluated quickly and easily using specific search criteria. The query returns a list of "short profiles" indicating the member's name, age, location, and profile photo. By clicking on one of the short profiles, the searchers can view the full user profile, which contains more detailed information, and they can decide whether or not to initiate contact. On some intermarriage dating sites, there are limited services for non-paying members. For example, on Thaicupid.com, non-paying members can search and browse other profiles, and if they are interested in those profiles, the site offers a way to express their interest in those profiles without sending a full message. Non-paying members can send or receive messages only from a monthly subscriber. If non-payers want to initiate contact with other non-paying members, they must become a subscriber. After the subscription fee is paid, they can access all services on the site.

Although the majority of paying members of intermarriage dating sites are Western men, five of twenty-four women I interviewed had also been subscribers. All were more highly educated and had higher incomes than the average Thai. As they said, being a paid member allowed them to send personal messages to standard or non-paying members whose profiles appealed to them. Also, as paid members, their own profiles would appear higher up in the search results. This might offer them a higher degree of success in searching for cross-cultural relationships online. For example, in the case of Chan and Ran, they paid to subscribe to one intermarriage dating site after they were attracted to some interesting profiles of men

who were only non-paying members. In contrast to Chan and Ran, Ping and Jin had not subscribed to intermarriage dating sites, although they could afford to pay a monthly fee. They chose to contact only Western men who were paying members, since they thought these men tended to look for more serious relationships than non-paying men.

These women's experiences and viewpoints reflect the complexity of partner selection in cross-cultural relationships online. It is not easy to establish precisely how social and cultural forces shape women's preferences and selection on intermarriage dating sites, and this is true even for those who live in the same culture or come from the same social class. In what follows, I explore the experiences of Thai women who had differing criteria and expectations in their searches and choices of prospective partners. It is important to note that there are many characteristics and criteria playing a role in the choice of a potential partner. The following stories focus on ways in which women chose to pursue relationships online with their partners. It highlights the most important criteria for each woman, reflecting their individual expectations, which are inextricably linked to this process.

Social Class and Education

Chan applied to be a member of several intermarriage dating sites, sometimes paying to become a gold member in order to access extra services. She also made some initial contact with Western men whom she considered attractive. She did not differ greatly from Jin in that they were both highly educated women in their late 30s or early 40s who had never married. As discussed in Chap. 2, such women turn to intermarriage dating sites when they face significant difficulty in finding a suitable local match. Marrying a Western man offers these women an alternative for circumventing local marriage pressure, as well as allowing the women to marry up via the geographical hierarchy and the economic disparity between the two countries (Constable 2005). However, merely being Western is not sufficient to constitute a good match, and the women were also concerned about their prospective partners' social status. Some women, like Chan and Jin, specified educational criteria for the men they wanted to date or have a relationship with. As Chan commented:

> I didn't mind which country he came from, but he had to be able to speak English, and he should have a Bachelor's degree and a stable job. Everyone in my family is well educated, and also my friends have a high education.

> How would I tell them that my husband was poorly-educated and didn't have a good job? You know me well because we have been friends for a long time. I think you know I never wanted a rich man because I had everything in Thailand, but I didn't want a man who was less educated. When I searched, I only looked up men who had completed a Bachelor's degree. And if I got messages or interest from men, I only replied to men who had a degree. (Chan, online interview, October 2011)

It appears that a good education remains important for Chan as a way of determining the economic and social status of the Western men. Although Chan turned to intermarriage dating sites because she did not want to remain either unmarried or marry down in the local marriage market, she still preferred men with high levels of education and good labor market opportunities. Jin, a woman in her late 30s and never married, had a similar attitude. After applying to be a member of an intermarriage dating site, Jin received many replies from men. She answered only highly educated men. Finally, she decided to start a relationship with Sanj, an Indian man who was a pilot and had finished his degree in England. She made this decision even though she had originally turned to intermarriage dating sites to search for Western men.

> I placed a personal profile and put three photos on my profile. I received more than 100 replies. It was fascinating. But when I looked at those profiles, I was disappointed. Most of them were from men who I did not want to meet. I chose to reply to only 10 men who fitted my criteria. I looked at their education first, and then their age. When Sanj sent me a message, I hesitated to write back because I wanted a *farang*, not an Indian man. But when I looked up the details in his profile, it was interesting. I could tell he was a man that I wanted even though he wasn't *farang*. (Jin, face-to-face interview, February 2012)

In case of Chan and Jin, social standing was still an important factor in determining their choice of their partners. They were reluctant to enter into a relationship with Western men with lower qualifications. This might be because Chan and Jin didn't think about migration before turning to dating sites. They just wanted to expand the size of the pool of potential partners. Their desire for Western men was connected to a perceived lack of marriage options in Thai society, not a desire to migrate to a Western country. Chan clearly described herself as "very picky". As she said, "I wanted to marry, but I preferred to be single than marry someone who

wasn't perfect for me". For them, the social class and education of any prospective partners still outweighed nationality or other factors.

Marital Status and a Desire to have Children

Like Chan and Jin, Ping pursued cross-cultural relationships online because of the great difficulty in finding a local match. However, in the case of Ping, she had a strong desire to marry and have a child before she turned 40. When she began seeking a relationship online in the first three months, she had many criteria for the man whom she wanted to marry. She said:

> I was too picky before I met Glenn. The list of my desires was too long. I wanted a single man who had no kids because I thought if he had kids already, maybe he wouldn't want more kids. And I also wanted a man who was within five years of my own age and had a degree. When Glenn messaged me, I didn't immediately reply to him because I thought Glenn was too old, and at that time I was chatting to another man. But two weeks later [after Glenn sent Ping the first message], the man who I was chatting to for nearly two months stopped writing to me. He said that he no longer had time to talk. I was disappointed in him and felt too tired to search for a new man. I was about to give up, but two weeks later, I returned to the site and decided to open my mind and to talk to some men who showed a liking for me although they didn't meet all of my expectations. (Ping, online interview, December 2011)

It seemed that Ping reduced her search criteria after the man whom she had considered a good prospect stopped talking to her. She went back to the intermarriage dating site and chose to reply to some single Western men who had recently contacted her. Glenn was one of the men whom she contacted, even though he was not in her preferred age range. His profile showed that he was single and wanted to have children. Ping explained the reason she decided to reply to him as follows:

> I asked myself what I really wanted in my life. My answer was that I wanted to have kids. So, I told myself I should seek a single man who really wanted to have a family and kids. I shouldn't think much about his age, education or occupation. So, I replied to Glenn and three other single men who said in their profiles that they had no kids and also desired to have kids. Only Glenn wrote back to me, so I started talking to Glenn although he was 13 years older than me. I thought at least he was single and shared the same important goal as me. Maybe he would be the person who could fulfill my dream. (Ping, online interview, December 2011)

Compared to Chan and some highly educated women in their late 30s, Ping was less selective after she had a failed online experience. She explained that this was due to the intensity of her desire to have a family. For this reason, Ping compromised her preferences for a partner closer to her age, in order to pursue a relationship online with a man who shared her dream.

Religion and Faith

Almost all of the women interviewed did not appear to be particularly interested in the religious beliefs of their prospective partner. The one exception to this was Tay, a woman in her late 30s, who had a Master's degree and worked with an international shipping company in Thailand. Like Chan, Jin, and Ping, Tay decided to list herself on several intermarriage dating sites because of the limitations of the local marriage market. Unlike the other women, she specified her religion, explaining:

> I became a Christian when I was 22 years old. Since then, my faith has been an important part of my life. I wanted a man who felt the same sense of self as I did. I didn't want to marry someone outside of my faith. I actively sought someone of the same faith because I thought it would make our marriage work more smoothly. If I had kids, I wanted to raise them in my faith. (Tay, online interview, September 2011)

Having a partner with the same religious and spiritual beliefs was an important part of Tay's selection criteria. She attended church almost weekly, and she said she always made decisions based on her religious beliefs. When I met her in Thailand in February 2012, she invited me to go to church with her on Sunday. I went there and found that she was quite devout. That made me question why she did not search from the niche sites that focus on Christian dating. She replied:

> I used it [a Christian dating site] before I turned to a Thai [intermarriage] dating site, but it was difficult to search for *farang* who were Christian and interested in a Thai woman on such dating sites. I mean you can search for Christian men from all over the world, but you can't specify a man who is seeking a Thai girl or interested in Thailand. But on a Thai [intermarriage] dating site, you know all of them are searching for a Thai. So, you just put religion as a criterion into your search, and then the results will show up. (Tay, face-to-face interview, February 2012)

At the time of the interview, Tay had been in a relationship with Tim, an American man she met after she had used intermarriage dating site for nearly five years. She found his profile through the search engine of one intermarriage dating site after she had broadened her search criteria and specified only religion and age range. As she said, she would be reducing her chance if she remained inflexible on some criteria, such as education, nationality, and physical appearance. After the search results came up, she viewed many profiles and sent messages of interest to those profiles that immediately appealed to her. Only Tim and two other men replied to her expressions of interest. Finally, she decided to pursue a relationship online with Tim because she thought he was a good Christian who would share the same faith, even though he did not have a degree and worked in retail clothing stores.

Nationality and Country

Some women I interviewed turned to intermarriage dating sites because they had dreams of living abroad and fantasies about Western men and society. Such women tended to initiate relationships with Western men who came from the country that they desired to live in or travel to. For example, Ying, who I mentioned in Chap. 2, had a dream about living overseas. She wanted to live and work in a Western country, especially Australia, England, or the USA. When she searched for Western men on intermarriage dating sites, she always specified these three countries in her search criteria. Her initial reason for using dating sites was that she wanted to practice her English, but then she decided to start an online relationship with Gavin, an Australian man, in October 2011, after she had been talking with him online for three months.

> I am in a relationship with him now :-) Did you see my status on Facebook? I changed it last week after he officially asked me to be his [online] girlfriend. I am so happy now:-) I didn't think about it before. I just wanted to practice my English online. I started talking to him after he sent me an expression of interest. I replied to him because he lives in the country that I wish to work and live in. But now he is my [online] boyfriend. I can't believe it! (Ying, online interview, October 2011)

Ying, a young woman in her mid-20s, was not the only one to dream of living overseas, but also Dang, a divorced woman in her mid-40s, chose only to talk with Western men from English-speaking countries. Dang explained her reasons:

The most important thing for me was that they came from countries that use English as a first language. My English wasn't very good when I started to use intermarriage dating sites, but I could communicate in English. And I thought I didn't want to learn a new language if I met someone and migrated to his country. I was too old to do that. My cousin used an [intermarriage] agency and met a Dutch man. She got married and migrated there. She told me she couldn't talk to his parents and friends and couldn't do anything without her husband. Although her husband was a good man, she was bored. That was why I didn't want to search for Dutch, German, or French men or any man who came from a country that did not use English as a first language. I went to dating sites because I wanted to find someone and have a new life in a new country. I didn't want to just stay at home and do nothing like my cousin. (Dang, online interview, July 2011)

Dang came from a low socioeconomic background. After her divorce and her negative experiences of marriage with a Thai man, the image of a responsible *farang* man motivated her to seek cross-cultural relationships online. Like Lek and other divorced women with children in this study, Dang wanted to improve her economic status and also prove to her ex-husband that she could raise their children without him. However, the opportunity for her children to live abroad and grow up with a good education was the main factor in motivating her search for a Western man. Yet, Dang would not happily stay at home even if her prospective husband could afford to support her. For this reason, she always specified in her search criteria those countries where English was the first language. Part of this reason might be because Dang often talked online with her cousin who lived in the Netherlands. She felt that her cousin's life was so boring even though she had married a good man. At that time, Dang thought such a dreary life was due to her cousin living in a non-English-speaking country, so she modified her search accordingly.

In contrast to Dang, Lek sought a German man, even though she could not communicate in German. Lek explained:

My aunty married a German man. She always tells me I should find a German man and move there. I didn't think I would seek a *farang* man until my ex-husband had a second wife. I know a little bit of English now, so I think looking for a German man might be easier for me because my aunty could help and support me. And she also said if I meet someone and migrate there, she can find a job for me at a Thai restaurant. (Lek, online interview, July 2011)

Although Lek and Dang expressed a strong desire to migrate to Western countries to improve their economic status and family welfare, this did not mean that they searched for cross-cultural relationships without any considerations. They created their search criteria based on the country that they hoped would yield some benefits for their future. In the case of Lek, her search criteria tended to be influenced by her aunt who was involved in a cross-cultural marriage. The migration chain was important in determining her criteria. She decided to search for a German man because of a network of kin. In contrast, Dang chose to specify her search based on English-speaking countries to avoid the situation where she would be heavily dependent on her prospective partner.

Search Criteria: Mating Preferences in Online Romantic Marriage Markets

Women's search criteria for prospective long-term partners point to women's agency, choice, and selectivity, as opposed to popular stereotypes of the passivity and desperation of mail-order brides. Women who search for cross-cultural relationships online share similar desires with other partner-seeking women in that they want love and seek someone who matches their search criteria in order to establish their own families. None of the women I interviewed were interested in a Western man purely because they were Western. They set their own search criteria based on their personal experiences, expectations, and life histories.

The stories of these women provide insight into women's needs and desires that inform the selection of partners in cross-cultural relationships online. They reflect that although almost all of the women desire relationships, they do not allow their desires to outweigh other reasoning nor do they rashly enter into relationships without any consideration. Individuals vary in the ways they make decisions regarding the selection of their online daters. Intermarriage dating sites provide them with a "search" feature in the main menu that includes categories like country, marital status, education, age, religion, income, physical appearance, and the desire to have children.

After searching according to selected criteria, the short profiles appear, including some details and a profile photo. Women can view a profile photo and decide if they want to see a full profile and initiate contact. Most of the women I interviewed tended to make contact or respond to Western men who had a profile photo. As Chan explained, her search

found more than 100 profiles that matched her criteria. Although she did not base her selections solely on the photo, being able to see his appearance was reasonably important for her. It was not just the physical appearance, but also profile photos told her about whom she was going to pursue intimate relationships online with, possibly providing a visual cue about their personality and social status.

Interestingly, almost all of the women interviewed claimed to place no great value on physical attractiveness. None of the women set their search criteria by height, weight, eye or hair color, or physical appearance. They chose to place more importance on some characteristics that they believed would support the development of mutual affection. This might be because these women were pursuing long-term relationships. Most studies about preferences in partners have demonstrated that women considering long-term relationships have a stronger inclination for the financial prospects, social status, and education attainment of prospective partners as opposed to their physical attributes, while men place higher value on physical attractiveness and health in long-term partners (Hitsch et al. 2010; Minervini and McAndrew 2006; Shackelford et al. 2005).

This was clearly evident in the case of educated women in their late 30s or early 40s, as noted in Chap. 2. Although the cultural norms of Thai hypergamy may encourage them to pursue cross-cultural relationships online as a way to expand the size of the marriage market and deal with social pressure to marry, most still stated preferences online and limited their options to a man who was equally if not more highly educated. None admitted to focusing on, or specifying their search for, the Western men's income even though an income criterion could be found in the search menu. This might be due to two reasons. First, marriages for highly educated women become less necessary in terms of economic dependence on male earnings. Almost all of them are well above average in terms of income in Thailand. Second, Western men's income is always considered to be high in comparison with Thai living standards. Even though it might still represent a low income in Western countries, it is still higher than the average in Thai terms. Thus, it can be said that most highly educated women interviewed still preferred to be in a relationship with an educated Western man; they were reluctant to enter into a relationship with a more poorly educated Westerner. For these women, Western men's education was likely to be highly valued in terms of social status and compatibility more so than their financial wealth. They seemed to skim over the fact

that financial status tends to be linked to educational status and accounted their search criteria on the basis of Western men's education.

This finding coincides to some extent with that of Constable (2005), who found that cross-cultural marriages can be viewed as "global hypergamy", which allows the upward geographical mobility of women from less developed locations. However, most of the educated women I interviewed still valued social status in their preferences of partners. When they signed up on intermarriage dating sites, they still specified education in their search criteria and used these criteria to screen out the "wrong" people.

Also, most of the highly educated women interviewed considered their choice of partners as more than an opportunity for international migration. They find themselves seeking alternatives in their search for a suitable partner to fulfill their needs and desires. They did not place greater emphasis on Western men's nationality or countries. The important factor for them was communication with Western men who had the ability to converse in English. In contrast, the main motivations for seeking cross-cultural relationships for lower-middle-class women and young single women in their 20s was a focus on opportunities for international migration and overseas employment. These women were likely to search for Western men who came from the countries to which they wanted to migrate or that offered social support networks.

However, women's search criteria could change over time. This may well be due to the fact that decisions to pursue cross-cultural relationships online are not in the hands of the women alone. Western men also have an influence on women's selections. For example, Ping, Jin, and Tay had written to Western men whom they considered to be good prospects but were disappointed because those men had not replied or had stopped writing to them. Therefore, some women might decide to disregard some characteristics and be more flexible in their search criteria in order to consider men who had initiated contact or expressed some initial interest. Jin was willing to ignore Sanj's nationality and ethnicity and chose to focus on his education and occupation instead. Ping decided to prioritize Glenn's desire for home and children because she was worried about her fertility. Tay pursued a relationship with Tim although he was poorly educated because she gave precedence to faith and religious identity in her partner preferences.

Therefore, although some details in Western men's profiles do not match women's initial preferences, some women might decide to pursue a relationship with those men when they reconsidered what really mattered to them. This is not to say that Western men's socioeconomic status is not

important to women, but that it is less compelling in the face of prospects in the local marriage market, possibly due to global economic inequities. Also, once women decide to pursue cross-cultural relationships and even develop that link into online lovers, they are willing to completely disregard an element that does not match their prior expectations and choose to attend to the whole, rather than to its parts (Illouz 2007). Therefore, in what follows, I explore the processes of online communication from first sight on intermarriage dating sites to spending more time together via online communication tools in order to illustrate how love and intimacy can be initiated and develop in cyberspace.

From Strangers to Lovers: The Sequence of Online Romantic Relationships

The previous section illustrates that search criteria on intermarriage dating sites are important in women's search for Western men for dating or long-term relationships. In the following discussion, I examine how cross-cultural relationships can develop in online contexts. The section outlines the sequencing of the process of communication from the first view of online profiles to increased time spent together through online communication tools and getting to know each other as online daters, who express their feelings and affection. The dynamic natures of these processes are examined and the contingent nature of the relationship between my participants and their online lovers is explored. Some women developed their relationship with Western men from online strangers into more stable pen pals, while others progressed further into becoming online partners or lovers. In yet other cases, the relationships did not last long enough to get to this stage.

The Story of Na: Three Years on an Intermarriage Dating Site

The story of Na, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, illustrates the process of developing online relationships. Na, a 30-year-old hairdresser from Bangkok, had spent three years on intermarriage dating sites before meeting her husband. When I first met her via a Thai online community, she had been married to William, a 50-year-old Swedish man for four months and was in the process of applying for permanent residency. During the three years on intermarriage dating sites, Na had communicated with many Western men, but only with four men did the relationship develop into online romantic intimacy. All of these men were older

than her by more than ten years. Na explained her reason for meeting older men: at first, she refused to pursue such relationships but had wasted nearly six months chatting to young Western men who were closer to her age. As she had not met anyone she was interested in, she decided to talk to some Western men who were more than ten years her senior.

After corresponding with many Western men, she met an Australian who was nearly twenty years older than her. He had planned to visit Thailand and initiated the first contact only one week before he came to Thailand. Na replied to his message and started chatting with him. When he came to Thailand, she met him at a restaurant near his hotel. She said that she was not attracted to him when they met in person. It seemed to her that he wanted only a holiday girlfriend who could take care of him while he was in Thailand. She only met him in person because she had never experienced dating any Western men before.

After the man returned to his country, he did not contact her anymore. Na returned to an intermarriage dating site. Three months later, she met a Dutch man who was 12 years older. He expressed an interest in her profile and she replied expressing her interest in his profile. At that time, both were non-paying members. Two days later, he sent her the first message and told her that he paid to subscribe to the site because he really wanted to get to know her. She replied to his message and started chatting to him via the communication tool in the site. Then, they exchanged e-mail addresses and moved to communicate via MSN and Skype. They chatted with each other every day for nearly one month, and he told her that he would like to come to Thailand and meet her in person. She stopped using the site after she fell in love with him and decided to get to know him more. However, one month later he stopped chatting and told her that he had no time to chat and talk to her, and then he deleted and blocked her from his contact lists without any explanation.

Na was shocked and felt hurt. She deleted her profile on the site and thought that she would never use it again. Four months later, she was bored at work and decided to search for a Western man again. This time, she changed to using a free intermarriage dating site. On the new site, she received many messages from both Western and Asian men. She replied only to the Western men who were older than her, who came from developed countries in Europe, and who had a stable job listed on their profiles. After replying to their messages, some of the men did not keep up contact with her, while others asked to chat with her via Webcam. Only two men kept sending her messages. Finally, she gave a Swedish man her

contact number because it seemed to her that he was looking for a long-term relationship. He sent her phone messages every day and chatted with her via Skype every weekend. One month later, he told her that he would like to visit her in the next five months and organized to travel in Thailand with her. He always called her *teerak* (darling) and expressed a desire to move to Thailand and live with her after his retirement. Na felt confident about this relationship and thought that he was the right man for her. After two months, she switched off her profile on the site and kept talking to him. One month before his holiday, he told her that he could not visit her in Thailand because his father passed away. He had to change his plans and spend his holiday with his mother. She told him that she understood his situation although she was disappointed. After that, everything changed. He did not chat to her via Skype any longer and only sent her two or three messages per week. He said that he was busy and would be back in contact with her later. She waited nearly a month and hoped he would contact her as he did before. However, he never initiated further contact with her. He only replied to her text messages. She was confused and thought he had met a new woman. Finally, she decided to create a new profile on the same site and search for his profile. She was shocked and disappointed after she found that he was still online in the site. Na was online for one week and found that he was online nearly every day. She was angry and upset, and she decided to send him a message in the site to tell him that she used a new profile and knew that he was lying to her. He did not reply to her and blocked her from messaging him through the site as well as over Skype and MSN.

At that time, Na thought that the only way to make herself feel better was to find someone else. She changed the details in her profile to make it clear that she was interested only in a serious relationship that would lead to marriage. After that, she did not receive as many messages as before. Only a few men initiated contact with her. One was a 47-year-old German man. He told her he was interested in her profile and wanted to get to know her. She chatted with him via MSN nearly every day. One month later, he told her he was not looking for a serious relationship. He just wanted someone to chat to because he was unemployed and bored at home. Na was really disappointed in him and stopped looking online again.

Two months later, she was back online on the same site. There were some messages left in her profile. She was bored because most of these messages were short. They wrote only "hello" to her. Only one message from William, a 50-year-old Swedish man, was long. He wrote that he was

seeking a serious relationship and thought they both were looking for the same thing. She said that she replied to him without any expectations. He wrote a message to her the next day and told her he planned to travel to Thailand in the next three months and wanted to visit her to see if there was any chemistry between them. Since she had some failed online experiences, Na did not trust William at first. However, after William kept writing messages to her every day and telling her about his everyday life for nearly a fortnight, Na felt close enough to him to trust him more. They both deleted their profiles on the intermarriage dating site and moved to chat via Webcam. They sent messages via mobile phone every day for nearly three months before William traveled to Thailand and met her in person.

Na's story demonstrates how cyberspaces are linked to the intimate experiences of everyday life. Among women and men who seek their prospective spouses from other parts of the world, the Internet creates a time-space compression that greatly increases the scope and efficacy of communication. Online interactions have become an important way in establishing, re-establishing, expanding, or breaking up relationships across national and cultural boundaries (Constable 2007; Saroca 2012). The intensity of online interactions not only facilitates mutual self-disclosure, but it also allows expression of love and intimacy. It encourages rapid intimacy, props up imagined romantic prospects, and enables greater hope for relationship formation (Albright and Conran 2003).

To expand this point, in what follows, the discussion considers women's experiences in cyberspace. I examine how Thai women create a feeling of connection and closeness with Western men through the Internet. What I argue here is that cyberspace allows expressions of intimacy. In the process of online communication, individuals can build up stronger relationships through e-mailing, chatting, and other Internet technologies. Intimate relationships can develop through frequent online interactions whereby individuals disclose personal information, thoughts, and feelings to their prospective partners, receive responses from them, and interpret these responses as understanding, validating, and caring.

From Intermarriage Dating Sites to Online Communication Tools

In this study, almost all of the women I interviewed tended to progress to communicate through online communication tools that were not on the dating sites after they found a potential partner. Intermarriage dating

sites were solely the channel to search for cross-cultural relationships. In some cases, these women said that they were still embarrassed and hesitant to let their friends or families know about their private stories. They would be ashamed if someone who knew them found their online dating profiles. Some of them hid their profiles or deleted profile pictures on intermarriage dating sites when they were not online on the sites. Thus, although intermarriage dating sites provided online tools to communicate and develop relationships, women preferred to communicate through personal e-mail accounts more than intermarriage dating sites. Pla explained why she was not comfortable with communication through her profile on intermarriage dating sites:

> I would be embarrassed if my friends, co-workers, or students found me on the [intermarriage dating] site, so I always hid my profile on the search engine when I wasn't online. That was why I didn't get many expressions of interest there. When I was interested in someone's profile, I would send him a message. If he replied quickly when I was still online, I would ask for his email address and switch to communicate offsite. You know … I used the site for nearly one year, but I talked to only three men. One of them became my husband. He accidentally found me when I was online and sent me the first message. I replied to him that I didn't use the site much, and if he wanted to chat to me, to please give me his email address. He replied, giving me his email account without hesitation. Some men didn't do that. They were reluctant to switch offsite. Maybe they thought it was more private to communicate offsite [giving private e-mail]. I understood this point, but for me it wasn't convenient to communicate on the site. I was embarrassed to be there. (Pla, online interview, December 2011)

Thus, although intermarriage dating sites are essential in initiating cross-cultural relationships, there is some stigma attached to the practice. Some women I interviewed developed their online relationships by quickly moving to other social networking sites because they felt they had greater control and would be better able to keep their marriage search private. Moreover, almost all of these women turned to intermarriage dating sites with the expectation of a long-term relationship with a Western man. According to Gibbs et al. (2006), the relational goals of online daters are important factors determining what is disclosed, particularly when they seek long-term interactions with those they communicate with. Online daters with long-term goals of establishing face-to-face relationships are generally more honest and disclose more personal information; they make

more conscious and intentional disclosures to others. Thus, after the first meeting on intermarriage dating sites, they probably switched to communicate offsite through asynchronous and synchronous communication tools in cyberspace.[1] For example, Ran met Simon, her Swedish husband, on an intermarriage dating site. After Simon replied to her, the conversations started on the dating site with only a few messages going back and forth, and then they exchanged e-mail accounts, moving to contact each other through e-mail and instant messages via hotmail and Skype. Ran recounted:

> I found Simon's profile in the email that I received from the dating site. Every week the site sent an email to inform me about those men who matched my preferences. When I saw Simon's profile, I was attracted to his profile and the photos. He was only three years older than me and he said in his profile that he loved reading and traveling. I decided to leave a message, and then he replied to me the next day. After sending a few messages back and forth on the site, we exchanged [personal] email accounts. Simon had a Thai ex-girlfriend and was interested in Thai culture. He had planned to visit Thailand to celebrate his birthday in August [six months after they met each other in the sites]. He told me he wanted to meet a new Thai girlfriend and learn about Thai culture, so we wrote emails to share our interests and got to know each other more. (Ran, online interview, December 2011)

In Ran's case, e-mail messages were exchanged several times a day, which made her feel more closely connected to Simon. These e-mails were described as an important tool to create and develop an intimate relationship between them. Ran and Simon did not chat or send instant messages to each other on weekdays, although they both worked with computers and could access the Internet at their workplace. Ran explained that she preferred to write e-mails back and forth during the day more than chatting for two main reasons. First, they both had to work, and their schedules were not flexible. There was also a six-hour time difference between them, so e-mail was the kind of communication tool that allowed them to read and reply in their own time. Second, Ran defined herself as a writer. She always enjoyed writing e-mails to tell him about her daily life. E-mails allowed her to expand lengthy paragraphs containing her thoughts and ideas, and she could also take time to write e-mails in English and e-mails were better than chatting, which required more rapid exchange.

However, in some cases, people preferred to chat and send instant messages regularly via personal computer and mobile Internet to develop intimate

relationships. For example, Yam could not access the Internet when she was at work. Hence, she decided to buy a new mobile phone to access the Internet after she felt more attached to Duncan. She related her story:

> I met him on TLL [an intermarriage dating site]. He sent me an expression of interest and a message to my profile. He introduced himself in the first message and told me that he had experienced a failed relationship with a Thai woman before. So, he said if I was not looking for a serious relationship, please do not reply to the message. After I replied to him, he asked me for an email address. I gave him mine and then we moved to communicate offsite. At first, we didn't chat to each other much because of time differences and I couldn't access the Internet when I was working. I only emailed him at night time and chatted to him when I was at home. One month later, I decided to buy a new smart phone and gave him my contact number so that we could chat throughout the day via WhatsApp. We chatted to each other every day for nearly three months, but we never used video call. We just sent each other our photos. Finally, he asked if he could see me on Skype. We first set a time during the weekend to be online on Skype. I was so excited to see him there. It seemed that we were moving to the next stage. Only two weeks after that, after we first met each other via Skype, he asked me to be his [online] girlfriend. (Yam, online interview, November, 2011)

In addition to texting and e-mailing, in some cases, people also shared pictures with their online partners during the day. Na, for example, preferred to chat and share her everyday life with William through some mobile messaging applications in preference to other media. For her, synchronous mediated intimacy was preferred as a more honest and direct mode of communication.

> William told me everything about his everyday life. I had bad experiences with some men on the Internet and was about to give up, but William made me feel close, and began to trust him more and more. Every day he sent me short messages and some pictures of him during the day to share what was going on in his daily life. Although my English wasn't good enough to reply quickly, I could send emoticons or take some photos to share what I was doing. (Na, online interview, November, 2011)

Thus, it seems that both asynchronous and synchronous communication tools in cyberspace are essential in developing relationships between Thai women and Western men. Almost all of the women I interviewed

preferred to send e-mails or instant messages rather than using the phone or another voice medium. Although they sometimes communicated with Western men via video mediated programs such as Skype, they still preferred to type with web cam more than use voice-based media. This is because of two reasons. The first is language ability. Text-based communications allow women to have more time to express their feelings and emotions than voice-based communication. They can use translation programs or a dictionary to help them understand the meaning of text. Moreover, in developing relationships online, women and men might send many texts a day to their online daters to get to know each other and integrate each other into each other's everyday lives (Madianou and Miller 2012, 109). Texting, e-mailing, chatting, or other text-based communications allowed them to reply at a time of their own choosing more than voice-based communications, and many women felt more comfortable writing about their inner thoughts and feelings than speaking about them.

Through frequent online interactions, individuals become familiar with others whom they have never met in person. According to Zhao (2005), "knowledgeable others", people who understand individuals' deepest feelings, can easily be found in cyberspace because individuals feel that they can share with others their private thoughts, feelings, and personalities in that context. E-mailing, chatting, instant messaging, and other technologies are often described as online tools to create and develop close and intimate relationships between men and women from different parts of the world. As Wilding (2006, 132–133) notes, the exchange of frequent informal and spontaneous e-mails and messages is important for an intimate relationship across transnational contexts. The stories that people exchange during the day enable them to overlook the realities of geographic distance and time zones. It does not matter whether people actually know what each other is doing at a distance, the instantaneity of online communications and the intensity of the relationship they build up online are essential for creating the impression of such knowledge. Ran, Yam, Na, and other women I interviewed often said: "I knew what he was doing during the day, and he also knew what was happening in my life. We shared everything with each other".

In line with this, the following section will examine how women actually use the Internet in ways that create and develop romantic relationships before they meet their online dater in person. How do they decide to continue online dating with a potential "Mr. Right"? Rather than being independent of notions of romantic love in the offline world,

I aim to show that online relationships are indeed embedded in, and shaped by, a cultural model of romance. There are some commonalities between the development of intimacy and relationships in online and offline contexts.

Getting into the World of Online Romance

As Holland and Eisenhart (1990, 96) note,

> …romantic relationships begin with attraction. Closeness between the couple develops as the man treats the woman well and as she in turn reveals her attraction to and affection for him and permits the relationship to become more emotionally and physically intimate.

In their study of educated women in two universities, Holland and Eisenhart followed women's experiences, revealing a cultural model of romance and a sequence of events that can lead to the establishment of intimate and romantic relationships and at times, end in marriage. From the perspective of the women studied, the research shows that the first stage of such relationships is a search for an attractive partner. In this stage, a woman hopes to find the "right" man who is also interested in her. A woman's activities, thus, are focused on making herself appealing to men and positioning herself in settings where she can be seen by and meet men. The second stage involves increasingly regular, frequent, and close contact between a man and a woman who are attracted to each other. As this stage develops, the relationship becomes a more exclusive one, in which the partners are not seriously dating anyone else. They are expected to want to spend more and more time together. If the relationship can continue and develop into an exclusive one, a woman begins to arrange her life to be available to her boyfriend, and she hopes that her boyfriend will provide her with attention, gifts, and emotional closeness. When a woman has had a steady relationship for some time, she will begin to consider the third stage. This stage relates to the woman's contemplation of her future, in which romantic relationships lead to marriage and a family (Holland and Eisenhart 1990, 97–98).

The sequence of romantic relationships in the offline world described by Holland and Eisenhart is similar to the stories of the women in my study. In the online world, women spent their time searching for a prospective partner on intermarriage dating sites. They turned to the sites

where they can meet and be seen by Western men as demonstrated in Chap. 2, and they created their online profiles with the hope of finding a man who was interested in them, as we saw in Chap. 3. If the women could find an attractive man who was interested in them, they would then move to communicate offsite, which was more private and convenient than chatting on intermarriage dating sites. The regular, frequent, and close contact between a woman and a man who were attracted to each other would be increased through online communication tools.

Once an online intimate relationship became more established and linked to "a particular man", most of the women I interviewed tended to stop further searching by hiding or switching off their profiles on inter-marriage dating sites, and they also expected that their online daters do likewise. As Pla and Bee said:

> We both deleted our profiles on dating sites after we continued to talk for a while. We moved to chat through yahoo messenger and sent e-mails every night before we went to bed. We always emailed each other to talk about our lives … everything … past … present … and future. He sent me photos of his family. His mom was 86 years old, and his daughter was 8 years old. I also sent him photos of my family. (Pla, online interview, December, 2011)
>
> I kept talking to two men. One was American, another was German. Finally, I decided to keep chatting to only the German man because he was more serious than the other man. I saw that he posted on his profile [on the dating site] after talking to me for two weeks: "no search at the moment. I'm seriously looking here. At the moment I am already talking to a woman. I don't like to have more contacts and run things parallel". That was why I decided to stop searching for another man and hid my profile from the searching system to show him I was serious about our relationship too. (Bee, online interview, November, 2011)

As this stage develops, most of the women I interviewed wanted to spend more time communicating to a prospective partner, and they also expected the man to write e-mails, send messages, or chat with them every day. Many couples had regular meetings online and began to reschedule and to rearrange their lives to be available to spend more time with their online daters. For example, Ran tried to keep her weekends free to meet and chat online with Simon via video chatting. If she had something else to do on weekends, she tried to finish before midday so as to be able to spend her weekends online with Simon when he woke up in the morning in Sweden, as Ran said:

> Two weeks later, when my subscription expired, we agreed to switch off the profiles on the dating sites and stop looking. After that, we wrote emails to each other every day to speak about what we did during the day, and we scheduled chatting via Skype on the weekends. I always looked forward to it. When we sat in front of the camera we chatted about everything that we shared during the week. Sometimes we chatted to each other for three or four hours. We felt more attached to each other. We had the common interests. I felt like I had known him for a long time. (Ran, online interview, January 2012)

Moreover, in some cases, couples also planned a date online for a special occasion. Jin, for example, had known Sanj from an intermarriage dating site for two months before he arranged a birthday party online for her.

> He told me he couldn't be with me on my birthday, but he wanted me to know that I was special to him. He suggested meeting online for my birthday after I went out for dinner with my family. In the morning, he surprised me with flowers and a birthday gift. He did an order via a website and it was delivered to me with his card. He said in his card … "please open the gift when we have birthday drinks together". When I was out with my family, I always looked at my watch and wanted to finish dinner so as I could go home and talk to him. When I went home and met him there [online], he surprised me again. He had a birthday cake and told me to make a birthday wish and he blew out the candles on my birthday cake. (Jin, face-to-face interview, January 2012)

As Baker (2005, 77) notes, planning dates or special encounters online could make couples feel more like their online spaces and conversations resembled dates they would have if they were together face to face. In the case of Jin, Sanj tried to set up situations and brought in more detail in the visual realm, such as making a birthday wish and opening a gift through web cam. The special online date that Jin received from Sanj on her birthday made her feel attractive and valued, as she said: "he made my birthday very special, even though we were far away from each other. He was attentive and kind to me. I so appreciated what he did for me. I've never gotten this from anyone else, even my Thai ex-boyfriend".

Thus, it seems that the aforementioned model of romance and attractiveness is also applicable to both online relationships and cross-cultural relationships. The kind of treatment that women received from men online could determine their value (Holland and Eisenhart 1990, 106). Consider Jin's story here. Although she hesitated to be in a relationship

with Sanj because of his ethnicity, her feelings for him gradually changed after they had kept talking for a while. The intensity and constancy of their online communications made her feel close to him. She was willing to disregard those characteristics that did not match her expectations. Jin defined Sanj as "Indian [ethnicity] but Western [culture]" and proudly focused on his occupational status. When the relationship developed into an exclusive one, they both closed their profiles on the intermarriage dating site where they had met and stopped searching for anyone else. Jin tried to allocate time to staging occasions for communicating and working on their romantic relationship, such as changing her work shifts and canceling her weekend plans to have more time to spend online with Sanj. In exchange, Sanj provided her with attention, gifts, and emotional closeness even though they lived far apart and had never met in person. The special birthday that Sanj arranged online was interpreted as an effort to do something nice, special, and romantic for her.

Thus, contrary to popular myths about online and cross-cultural relationships, which assume that such relationships threaten the accepted values of romantic love, the initial stages of online cross-cultural relationships are likely to be based on a similar notion of romantic love. Most of the women I interviewed referred to romantic moments that had happened in the online world before the first face-to-face meeting. Some women defined failed online relationships as leaving them with "a broken heart", emphasizing the emotional pain that could accompany losing someone they had never met in person. For example, Na felt hurt and depressed when the man that she had chatted to everyday for three months stopped talking to her and disappeared from her life. Cyberspace for them was not only a means for searching and meeting someone, but it was also a way to establish and develop cross-cultural relationships and intimacies before meeting face to face.

In conclusion, the stories of women in my study show that deep emotional intimacy, affection, and romance can be initiated and developed in cyberspace. Women and men with long-term relationship goals tended to open up and present themselves to each other in a realistic manner. This may well be because their true attributes will eventually be revealed in time if their online cross-cultural relationships lead to face-to-face meetings. They discussed their lives, thoughts, and desires through frequent and constant communications, and planned for an offline meeting. The fact that some men who presented themselves as interested in a long-term relationship turned out not to be genuine does not discount the emotional

and romantic potential of online communication for those who are. As Baker (2005, 101) notes, online relationships can move more quickly than offline relationships because people in online relationships pay more attention to what the other is writing/saying because that is the totality of their connection to the other person. Meeting online forces people to get to know each other without the distractions of sexual attraction and the physical body.[2] Furthermore, the Internet can be a comfort zone where people can express themselves more freely. They can feel safe and comfortable to communicate their feelings, thoughts, and emotions without embarrassment through text-based communications (Saroca 2012, 70). Because of this, it is not hard to understand why many women interviewed said that "when we finally met each other in person, I felt like I had known him for a long time".

NOTES

1. The salient difference between asynchronous and synchronous communications is synchronicity and its associated degree of interactivity. Synchronicity refers to the timing of message exchange within a given time frame. In cyberspace, when message exchange occurs in real time, it is referred to as synchronous communication such as instant messaging and chatting. Conversely, when messages or information are sent and recovered at different times, it is referred to as asynchronous communication, such mail or message boards. For further details, see Burgoon et al. (2010).
2. However, in some cases, after they had met each other in person, sexual attraction and the physical body became more important, at times leading to living together and migration. See more details in Chap. 6.

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The Movement from Online to Offline Relationships

We continued chatting for three months. We really liked each other, and I had fallen in love with him. I felt like I had known him a lot longer than three months. But when I was waiting for William at the airport, I was so nervous and a bit scared of meeting him in person. Maybe because I had high expectations and I really wanted our relationship to be real. I didn't want him to be disappointed with me. He was very special to me. I wanted to feel physical attraction to him, and I hoped that he would feel that as well when we met each other. I couldn't stop thinking when I was waiting. But as soon as I first saw him in person, I knew I really loved him. (Na, online interview, November 2011)

The previous chapter shows how online couples quickly become emotionally close and even intimate through frequent and intense online communications. In online contexts they can talk more openly about their emotions, needs, and desires than they would have done in offline contexts, at least in the initial stage of developing a relationship. Many women I interviewed said that it was easier to express their feelings and emotions in writing than by speaking, especially when they had to communicate in another language. However, although emotional intimacy might be developed in cyberspace, taking the relationship from cyberspace to offline is a crucial juncture in the lead-up to long-term relationships. As Baker (2005, 18–19) notes, in romantic relationships, taking the relationships from online to offline can be "a turning point" that distinguishes non-serious from serious relationships. Na, for example, had met and continued to chat with a number of Western men before she met William, but those

relationships could not be developed offline. The absence of physical contact is an important reason why some online cross-cultural relationships cannot survive or overcome long-distances.

In this chapter, I examine women's experiences through stages of the process of moving from online to offline relationships. I argue that when commitment between online couples increases, the relationship must move from cyberspace to the physical world if they wish to take cross-cultural relationships to a deeper level of intimacy and commitment. Moreover, I assert that the role of time and distance in international online dating, which is significantly different from local online dating, makes the process of romance potentially more intense and rapid when moving to the initial encounter offline.

The chapter starts by discussing the processes of setting up the meeting. The place of meeting, planning, and schedules are examined, for example, what place is deemed to be suitable for the first meeting? What are the preparations for the first face-to-face meeting? These issues reflect the inequalities of nationality, class, and gender in relation to immigration process as well as the embedded differences of gender and sexuality in each culture. The subsequent section focuses on women's experiences in the initial physical meeting: for example, what actually happens when they first meet their online daters in person? How do they feel during their first encounter? What strategies are used to solve problems during dating, for example, with language and cultural differences?

The Pre-meet: Setting Up the First Meeting

As noted in the previous chapter, many women felt that they already knew their online daters because they had spent several months communicating with each other before meeting in person. At the point of meeting face-to-face, some women, such as Chan, Jin, Na, and Yam, felt that they were in committed online relationships with their online dates, whereas others, including Pla, Ping, and Ran, believed that although they had fallen in love with their online daters, they nevertheless did not want to commit to a relationship until meeting in person. There were also three women, Oam, Nik, and Min, who met their online daters in person after they had communicated with each other for only a short time and they did not feel a deep attachment to each other. In this section, I examine the processes of setting up the first meeting in two parts: the place of meeting, and planning and schedules of meeting in person. The differences in setting up

the first meeting in person seem to indicate how emotional intimacy has developed in online communications.

Picking the Place: Why They First Meet in Thailand

Growing online commitment leads many couples to escalate their online relationships from a connection in cyberspace to meeting offline. However, such relationships are characterized not only by their online context but also by being cross-cultural and long-distance. In this study, I found that all of the women I interviewed first met their online daters in person in Thailand. The main reason for this was not only difficulties in obtaining a visa to travel to a Western country, or their financial resources, but it was also related to cultural constructions of romance and the stigma of online relationships. A clear example of this dynamic is the case of Chan. Chan had been granted visas for many countries, including the USA and England. Compared with other Thai women, it was not difficult for her to apply for a tourist or visitor visa to enter Germany, but she did not want to travel to meet John for the first time in his country. As Chan said:

> I could support myself to travel there [Germany], but I wanted John to come to see me in Thailand first. John invited me to meet him there when he knew I had a holiday one week. I was hesitant at first because we hadn't met each other in person. I talked to my close friends. They said he could be a criminal. It would be silly and crazy if I flew to meet him there first. So, I didn't do that. I just wanted to make sure I would be safe even if I felt like I knew John well. We had been having very in-depth conversations about life, our pasts and futures. But I had never been to Germany. I didn't know the language or anybody there. And also if he could plan to come to me, it proved to my family and friends that he was really serious about our relationship. I didn't want to feel like it was only me putting in all of the effort to make our relationship work or make it real. (Chan, online interview, January 2012)

Although Chan initiated the contact with John on his online dating profile, she was still reluctant to travel to meet him in person for the first time in his own country. Safety was an important reason for her to wait for the first physical meeting to take place in Thailand. What's more, Chan interpreted the first physical meeting as the man's effort to prove that he was serious about an intimate and long-distance relationship, especially as it related to the planning and scheduling of the first meeting. This

meeting could be the way to show her family and friends that she has a real relationship.

This reflects the prevalence of normative constructions of gender and the potential fluidity of gender performances in a relationship context. It is common for women and men paired together in intimate relationships to perform different sets of behaviors. The normative construction of gender assumes that the men will enjoy the more privileged and powerful status position within a relationship than women (Segal 1997). Thus, the man is presumed to initiate contact with the woman romantically as well as sexually, also to make decisions on behalf of both partners, and generally exercise greater power in the relationship (Pennington 2009). In the case of Chan, therefore, although she hoped for love and intimacy, she also faced a system of heterosexual relationships marked by double standards in romantic love (Holland and Eisenhart 1990). Her behavior and decisions were not only dominated by romantic fantasies, but the hierarchy of gender with regard to the rules of romance was also constructed in her relationship with John.

In addition to Chan, App was another woman in this study who decided not to first meet her online dater in person in his country. As mentioned in Chap. 2, App had been introduced to some Western men before she turned to intermarriage dating sites. However, the relationships did not continue because she could not communicate with the men. After she had used intermarriage dating sites for four years, her English had improved. She could read and write simple sentences, but she was still not confident enough to communicate face-to-face. A month after she met Aaron online, they felt attracted to each other. Aaron wanted to meet her in person, but he did not have time to travel overseas. He offered to pay for App to travel to his country. However, App decided not to take that opportunity to travel overseas. As she said:

> Aaron asked me to meet him there [Australia] after we had chatted to each other for only one month. He said he would pay for my trip and would be my sponsor to guarantee my financial ability. But I was afraid to go there alone. I had never been overseas before. I didn't know how to do it [all the paperwork etc.]. He said I could pay a migration agent to do it, but I decided not to go there and waited for him to meet me here [Thailand]. I had never met him in person. He might not be a good person, and if I had problems, my English wasn't good enough to communicate. I didn't know how and where I could ask for help. (App, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

It seems that safety and her lack of English language ability were the major factors why App decided not to go overseas alone even though Aaron was willing to pay for her trip. Chan and App's experiences did not differ greatly from others who had pursued cross-cultural relationships in cyberspace. When I was searching for participants in an online Thai community, a woman posted on a public online discussion board to ask for advice from other women about whether she should let her online boyfriend pay for her trip for a first face-to-face meeting in his country. Most women responded that she should not do so because of safety reasons. In addition, a few commented that even when the woman agreed to travel for their first meeting in his country, obtaining a visa was not easy. On this same discussion board, two women replied, writing about their own experiences of applying for a visa to first visit their online boyfriends. They could not apply for a partner (temporary) visa because they had never met each other in person. The women could only apply for a visitor or tourist visa, but their visa applications had not been granted. The women wrote that the reasons for their visa rejection were that the countries to which they applied believed that they were going to immigrate permanently rather than temporarily. Moreover, the women also wrote that their letters of financial guarantee for visa applications from their online boyfriends were insufficient evidence to prove that the women had adequate funds for travel and stay. They had to provide more formal documentation, especially evidence of their own employment, financial and economic commitments in Thailand.

Interestingly, immigration bureaus in some Western countries are aware of the issue of pursuing and developing cross-cultural relationships in the online world. For example, on the New Zealand Immigration Bureau website, there is a commonly asked question about the kind of visa that people can apply for when they have met each other online, but have never actually met in person. The Bureau's position reads as follows:

> If you are applying on the basis of your relationship with your boyfriend/ girlfriend, you will not meet the minimum requirements under partnership because you have not physically met. You may consider applying under the general visitor visa category.
>
> Under this category, you will need to show evidence of sufficient funds for your travel and stay, evidence of your employment, financial and economic commitments in your home country and evidence to establish your genuine intent. This may be in the form of travel itineraries and/or evidence of your relationship.

> You may provide a sponsorship form from a New Zealand citizen/resident to meet the funds requirements. However, this does not guarantee an approval of an application. Immigration, New Zealand (2013).

Moreover, on the Department of Immigration and Border Protection of Australia website, they stress that a couple applying for a visa who claim to be in a de facto relationship must demonstrate that they have been so for at least 12 months before the visa application is made.

> If a couple met each other over the Internet and developed a close relationship before they have physically met, the time since they began an online relationship before meeting in person could not be considered as part of the relationship requirement period. The one-year relationship requirement will only commence once they have met and have lived together, even if they later live apart temporarily. Department of Immigration and Border Protection of Australia (2013).

This illustrates that when online cross-cultural relationships begin to move offline, the legal systems of the nation-state become involved. This movement reflects an important aspect of the term of "intimate citizenship" that links the seemingly "private" world of intimacies to the more "public" world of politics (Plummer 2003). Love and intimacy across distance are not fully independent or left entirely in the hands of individuals. Instead, every nation-state has a system of rules and immigration laws that set the framework for what is permissible and what is not (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014). Accordingly, when online cross-cultural couples decide to meet in person, they are immediately faced with the immigration laws of various nation-states, which impose a wide range of formal legal constraints. The authorities have the power to use their own discretion in allowing, expediting, or slowing down the process of application for permission to enter the country (Breger 1998). Therefore, the role of the nation-state is one of the factors shaping the processes integral to cross-cultural relationships.

Moreover, the inequalities between richer and poorer nations also determine the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships. The immigration process to obtain a visa for Western men to enter Thailand is much easier. Consider the case of Karn, who first physically met Ralph in Bangkok three months after they had met on an intermarriage dating site. At first, Ralph did not plan to travel to Thailand, but a growing online commitment led him to make the trip to meet Karn in Thailand. Karn explained the process:

After we kept chatting to each other every day, we got to know each other more and more. Ralph always told me that he felt like he knew me better than his ex-wife. He had been divorced for nearly three years when we first met on a dating site. His daughter was living with him … I never asked him when we were going to meet each other in person because I knew he had to take care of his daughter. Two months after we had been chatting, he told me he would come to see me in Thailand for one week because it would be school holidays. His daughter was going to stay with his ex-wife for one week, so he decided to take a holiday. (Karn, online interview, November 2011)

This is similar to the case of Yam. Although Duncan had been in Thailand many times and had plans to travel to Thailand again before he met Yam on the dating site, he brought forward the date of meeting in person. Yam related the story:

When we first talked on the intermarriage dating site, Duncan told me he had planned to travel to Thailand in January. I was a little bit scared and thought that I would be his holiday girlfriend because he had decided to travel here before getting to know me. But when we kept chatting more and more, I became quite confident in our relationship. Sometimes when we chatted via Skype, I saw his family in the background and he introduced me to them. He opened his life up to me. After we had known each other for nearly five months, he surprised me. He told me he couldn't travel to Thailand in January. I was so disappointed when I heard that. He said [typed] nothing for 5 minutes. I was about to cry. And then he smiled and told that he had changed his plans and was coming to Thailand early. He would visit me the following month because he couldn't wait until January. He wanted to see me in person as soon as possible. (Yam, face to face interview, April 2012)

The first meeting in person between these online couples reflects that it is usually not difficult for Western men to travel to Thailand. Duncan and Ralph did not have to apply for a visa because they held New Zealand and American passports, which allowed them to stay in Thailand for a period not exceeding 30 days on each visit.[1] Therefore, it is much easier for Western men to make or change travel plans when they establish a suitable time and have funds to support their trips; also, the cost of spending a holiday in Thailand is cheaper than traveling to Western countries.

In short, the processes of taking cross-cultural relationships offline are more complicated than local online dating. The dynamics of cross-cultural

relationships are determined by immigration laws and global inequalities between poor and rich countries as well as the gendered form of romance that reinforces the power imbalance between men and women in intimate relationships. For these reasons, most online couples first meet in Thailand. These circumstances seem to support what Western men might see as the "natural" progression of relationships, in which they have more choice regarding how, when, and where the relationship develops.

Planning and Scheduling the First Meeting

When online couples want to meet each other in person, they describe feeling like they already know each other and they want to know if they can take the relationship further. At this stage, many women interviewed were already "in love" with their online daters. Some women had committed to being in online relationships with Western men, whereas others needed to physically meet before committing to an intimate relationship. At this point, before meeting in person, online couples had different plans about where they were going to meet, where they were going to stay the night, and what they were going to do together when they met each other in person.

In this study, I found that these plans and schedules were an indication of how intimate they were. In the cases of women who committed to be in a relationship with their online boyfriends, such as Chan, Jin, and Yam, they felt more able to tell their friends and family about their relationships. Most of them planned to introduce their online boyfriends to their family and friends in person, and their online boyfriends could stay the night at their homes. For example, when Yam met Duncan in person in November 2011, they decided to first meet at the airport in her hometown in the Northeastern region. Yam described how she felt:

> I was very excited when Duncan told me he would come to see me earlier than he planned. He told me I didn't have to meet him at Suvarnabhumi airport [Bangkok]. He would stay the night at the airport and then fly from Bangkok to see me here [Udon Thani]. When I talked to my friends, they said maybe he would meet another girl in Bangkok first. I was a bit worried and wondered if he would lie to me. So, I asked him to send me his airplane ticket. He forwarded it to me, and I saw it was true. He would get the airport at midnight, and then fly to Udon Thani at 6.00 am. So, we planned to meet each other there, and stay the first night together at a hotel in town. I would take him to visit my parents and daughter at my home the next

day, and if Duncan felt comfortable, he could stay at my place for one week before we planned to travel together for the second week. (Yam, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

This example contrasts to the cases of women who waited for their first meeting in person to decide if they would take the relationship further or not. Most did not invite their online daters to stay at their homes. For example, Ping, as I mentioned in Chap. 2, had never told her family and friends about her online relationship with Glenn. Only two close friends knew about him. When I talked to her about her plans for the first meeting in April, she said:

We will meet at Songkhla [the province near her hometown]. I will drive to meet him at the airport. I don't want my family to know about it until I feel confident that he is the right man for me. He understood my position. At first, he told me that we could meet in my hometown and that I didn't need to drive 150 kms to meet him there. But I told him that I want to meet him there first, and if everything goes well, I will introduce him to my family later. (Ping, face-to-face interview, March 2012)

When I asked her where she would stay the night in Songkhla. She answered:

I booked the hotel in town, but two rooms. I don't want to stay in the same room with him at the first meeting. I think I will take him to travel around there for two or three days, and let's see what happens. I don't have many plans for now. I want to see him first and then make a decision later. (Ping, face-to-face interview, March 2012)

Although Ping decided to meet Glenn by herself in another province, she told her close friends of her plans and that she would contact them after she met him. Safety concerns were the primary reason why Ping let someone know about the first meeting in person, even though she was confident that Glenn was a nice person.

I am quite sure he is a good man. We have talked to each other every day. I think he is nice, polite, and genuine. But I want to make sure I will be safe. That was why I told Anna and Tang [her close friends] that I will meet him next month. If something goes wrong, they will know what happened to me. I am so excited now. I can't tell you how I am feeling now. It is difficult to explain. Sometimes I feel I want to meet him in person and see what will

happen, but sometimes I am a bit afraid to meet up. Maybe it will be different between online and offline. Everything is good online, but I don't know what will happen when we meet offline. Anyway, I hope everything will go well. (Ping, face-to-face interview, March 2012)

Ping was still hesitant to meet Glenn in person. Even though she felt like she knew Glenn well, there were still some fears about safety and the possible difference between her relationship expectations and reality. This tension is echoed in the feelings of some of the other women I interviewed. Most of them were embarrassed to let their friends and family know about their online relationships, especially meeting someone on an intermarriage dating site. When they planned to meet each other in person, some of them decided not to tell their friends and family until they felt confident about the relationship. However, safety was still of concern to them. Ping decided to let her two close friends know about her first meeting, while Pla chose to let her online friends on a Thai online community know that she decided to meet her online dater in person. Pla told me:

> After we had chatted to each other for three months, he said he had a holiday coming up for one week. He would come to see me here. I was surprised because he told me only one week before he was due to leave. So, I posted on the site, saying that I was going to meet him face-to-face. If I didn't update my story after meeting, something would have happened to me. I didn't want to tell my real friends or family that I found someone on a dating site. I was embarrassed. When he came here [Chiang Mai province], I picked him up at the airport and dropped him at his hotel. We didn't plan to stay the night together at the first meeting. We agreed that if we had chemistry when we met in person, I would introduce him to my family. If not, we would be friends. (Pla, online interview, December 2011)

It was only when Pla met her future husband and found him to be the same as online, that she introduced him to her family three days after their first meeting. She told her family that she had met him on a website where people talked about travel experiences. This reflects the stigma associated with online dating. Women who pursue relationships on intermarriage dating sites try to avoid telling their family and friends that they first met in that way. Also, they try to alleviate this stigma and transform their online relationships into normative romantic love. This transition can be achieved when the relationship progresses to an offline encounter. The following section, therefore, shifts to explore women's experiences at

the first physical meeting in order to illustrate how women emphasize the romantic side of their relationships and how they transform their online love to normative romantic love.

The First Physical Meeting: Taking It into the Offline World

Any growing commitment between online couples needs to move from cyberspace to the physical world if the couples wish to pursue a long-term relationship. Turning virtual space into physical, tangible place is an important stage for developing cross-cultural relationships. All of the women in my research physically met their online daters at least once. After this stage, most of them had developed their relationship with Western men from online dating into more stable partnerships, while some had gone even further into a marriage, and others chose not to continue the relationship after the first face-to-face meeting. This discussion examines women's experiences at the first physical meeting. It is divided into two sections. The initial section explores the first moment when women meet their online daters in person. How did the women feel at the beginning of the first meeting? How did they negotiate the stigma of online relationships? Later, the discussion illustrates the ways that women felt and acted during that first date in person. How did they deal with and solve problems during the first physical date, for example, language and cultural differences?

The First Moments: Transition to a Normative Mode of Love

Illouz (2007, 90–91) argues that "Internet romance" stands in sharp contrast to the notion of "normative romantic love".[2] First, whereas romantic love has been characterized by an ideology of spontaneity, the Internet demands a rationalized mode of partner selection that contradicts the idea of love as an unexpected moment. Second, Internet romance is based on disembodied textual interaction whereas normative romantic love is intimately connected to physical co-presence. Thus, on the Internet, a rational search takes precedence over physical attraction. Third, normative romantic love presupposes disinterestedness, which totally separates the sphere of instrumental action from the sphere of sentiment and emotion. Internet technology, on the other hand, increases the instrumentalization of romantic interactions by placing a premium on the value people attribute to themselves and to others in a structural market. Finally, the notion

of romantic love is based on an idea of the uniqueness of the person loved whereas Internet dating is based on an economy of abundance, endless choice, rationalization, selective targeting, and standardization.

As described in the previous chapter, although almost all of the women I interviewed searched for relationships on intermarriage dating sites, they did not allow their desires to outweigh other reasoning to rashly enter relationships without any consideration. The choice of their prospective partners was based on their personal experiences, expectations and life-histories. None of them placed a great emphasis on Western men's physical appearances. Online romance with their online partners started from the process of selection from online dating profiles, and then developed through largely text-based communications without a physical co-presence. Thus, the first stage of cross-cultural relationships in the online world is not different from the Internet romance that Illouz (2007) describes. However, these relationships are not only online relationships, they are also long-distance relationships. It is usually not as easy to meet in person as with local online dating. Whitty and Carr's (2006) study illustrates that, rather than learning about each other online, most local online daters in their study expressed a desire to meet their online date in person as soon as possible. Unlike local online dating, most women I interviewed had chatted with and learnt about their online daters over a long period of time before they first met the Western men in person. The development of their online relationships had not occurred on the intermarriage dating sites, but had moved to online communication tools such as Skype, e-mail, or chatting applications on a mobile phone that provided more privacy.

The ways in which the women I interviewed had developed their online relationships were based on a notion of normative romantic love. Most of them stopped further searching after their online relationships with a prospective partner became more established; similarly, some women felt hurt and depressed when the men that they chatted with every day stopped talking to them. Moreover, some women tried to articulate their online relationships as an unexpected epiphany. For example, Na claimed that she was just bored with her everyday life and went to use a dating site without any expectations, and finally she met her husband when she was about to stop searching. This is not so different to Pla, who hid her profile when she was not online, saying that she did not use a dating site much at all. Her husband "accidentally" found her when she was online just for a short time. These situations illustrate that the idea of exclusivity, the ideology of spontaneity, and the sphere of sentiment and emotion, all of which are

important characteristics of normative romantic love, are also evident in the process of developing relationships in an online context. Thus, before meeting face-to-face, it is probable that many women felt that they were already in love with their online daters and tried to make their online relationships work in the same way as normative romantic love.

However, the transition was not complete until they met each other in person. Consider the case of Jin: even though she felt in love with Sanj after they chatted to each other every day, she always wondered if her online relationship with Sanj would be real. It was not until she first met him in person at the airport that she felt confident to believe that she had really found her *Nua Koo* (soul mate).

> When I was waiting for him near the ramp, he saw me first and walked up to me. I was nervous and excited. Before we met in person, I really knew I felt love for him, but I wasn't sure if it could be real. When I first met him [in person], that was for real. I instantly knew it was him. It seemed I was seeing someone I had known my whole life, like he had always been there, for me. (Jin, face-to-face interview, March 2012)

Jin recalled the first moment of her physical meeting with Sanj, feeling that she had finally found someone who would fulfill her life. When she first met him in person, for an inexplicable reason, she felt that she had known him for a very long time and felt more connected to him than anyone else. This could also be seen in Na's case. The first moment of meeting in person was described as "magic" when Na could feel physical sensations from William after they had kept chatting online and felt attached to each other for a period of time. Na explained the first moment that she met William in person at the airport:

> It was busy at the airport when I was waiting for him. But you know it was easy for me to scan the crowd for him when he walked up the ramp. Even though we had never met in person, I was sure he was the person I was waiting for. It was a wonderful moment. He was scanning for me and then he saw me. He walked toward me. I was shy when we first met in person. I couldn't find the words to speak, I could only smile and stare at him. He started to say hello and then he hugged me. At that time, I was sure that he was the right one for me. (Na, online interview, November 2011)

The feeling of meeting "the special one" seems to be a common feeling among women when they meet their online daters for the first time. Na,

Jin, and other women I interviewed recalled that in the first moments of meeting in person there was something special and inexplicable about it all. The Thai belief of *Nua Koo* was repeatedly employed to describe this moment. In Thai contexts, this belief is linked with the Buddhist belief of "karma". *Nua Koo* describes two people who share some sort of karma together in past lives. This belief does not focus on happily ever after. Rather, it reflects the idea that a couple will meet up with each other in a subsequent lifetime in order to complete any past lessons, usually to rectify any residual karma. Because of this, two people are meant for each other and wherever they are and whatever happens, they will finally meet up and experience a deeper love and connection (Charoensri 2011).

The belief of *Nua Koo* plays an important role in the first physical meeting of online couples. As Na said, she was about to stop searching for someone on intermarriage dating sites because she had some bad online experiences. When she received a message from William, she replied to him without any expectations. However, after they kept chatting everyday nearly three months before the first physical meeting, Na felt that she was in love with him. This stage did not differ from her previous relationships with Western men whom she had chatted to before she met William, but those liaisons could not be developed into offline relationships. Na proffered the reason as: "they were not my *Nua Koo*. That was why we couldn't take it further".

Na's rationale as to why the relationship with William was able to continue and succeed to reach a physical meeting, while the others had failed, was linked to the belief in *Nua Koo*. Hence, the belief in *Nua Koo* is used as a way of understanding how two people who live so far apart could become so intimate. The notion of "fate" plays a role in the *Nua Koo* concept in that the physical meeting is always meant to be. Perhaps women try to make sense of the randomness of their meeting, and the fact that they found someone on an intermarriage dating site indicates that there is something profound and inexplicable at work. Even though they pursue cross-cultural relationships in online contexts, the meeting is also based on random encounters that are somehow transcendent.

However, in the cases of women who had communicated with their online daters for a short time and did not feel a deep attachment to each other before the first meeting, the first moment of meeting was not described as magical or wonderful. For example, Oam met her online dater after they had known each other from chats on an intermarriage dating site for one week. The man had planned to travel to Thailand before

he met her online. They made an appointment to catch up on the second day of his trip. Oam explained her first meeting as follows:

> I met him at the café near his hotel. He told me he wanted to rest on the first day because he was tired from traveling. So, we decided to meet for dinner on the second day of his trip. I was a bit excited before meeting and wondered if he was different from the photo that he sent me. He was waiting for me in the café when I arrived. I almost walked past him because I wasn't sure if he was the person I had an appointment with. He looked at me and called my name, so I realized it was him. He was a bit different from his photo, but his looks weren't bad. We had dinner and spent three hours together. After dinner, he walked me to BTS [a sky train station] and messaged me when I was on the train. He said he liked my company and asked to catch up again. I replied to him on the train that "of course I would like to meet you again", but he texted me that he wanted to catch up again in four days. I wondered if he would meet with many girls here. Why didn't he want to catch up the next day if he liked my company? (Oam, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

It seems that, when Oam first met her online dater in person, her date with him was based on the notion of Internet romance that Illouz (2007) suggested. Oam and her online dater were still at the stage of partner selection. They both still had their profiles on an intermarriage dating site. An intimate relationship between them had not yet been established. As Oam said, he might make appointments with other Thai women. She might be one of his choices. An economy of abundance and endless choice was evident in their online relationship. Thus, it is not surprising that Oam did not claim a profound knowledge of her online dater. The idea of *Nua Koo* was not invoked for this first date.

Therefore, it is possible that this idea is constructed only after relationships have been well established. The articulation of the superstitious notion of *Nua Koo* is meaningful for the women because it is invoked to emphasize the romantic side of their relationships. They might, consciously as well as unconsciously, express their story in this way to better legitimize these cross-cultural relationships that were pursued in online and long-distance contexts. The *Nua Koo* discourse provides them with the appropriate cultural code with which to transform the Internet encounter into a narrative of love, alleviating stereotypes of Internet relationships and normalizing such relationships in order to reassure themselves, as well as others, that they have an equal chance at success as relationships that result from conventional face-to-face romance.

Women who mentioned the idea of *Nua Koo* in recollections of the first moment of physical meeting always claimed that they had finally met someone for whom they felt a deep understanding, and they felt like they had known each other for longer than it was in reality. The actual number of weeks and months that they had been communicating was not as important as the much longer timetable of karma in previous lives. Because of this, many things about their online daters could be learnt in a short period when they spent time together in the first physical meeting. To elaborate on this point, in what follows, I examine how the women describe feeling and acting during their first date in person, and why the evolution of cross-cultural relationships is potentially more intense after the first moment of physical meeting.

The First Meeting in Person: Moving to Offline Relationships

This section examines what really happened in the first physical meeting. Why did many online couples quickly become close and intimate after first meeting each other in person? This section is divided into two parts. First, I focus on the development of physical intimacy in the first meeting. It shows the ways that women use the idea of romantic love to negotiate the models of Thai gender and sexuality in the meeting. Second, I focus on the role of time and distance that also shape the process of romance in cross-cultural relationships. It shows that when long-distance travel is involved in order to have a physical meeting, it probably makes the progression of intimate relationships develop more intensely and quickly.

Sex and Sexuality in the First Physical Meeting

In Thai traditional culture, patterns of sexual behavior are linked with the social construction of gender in Thai society. The sexuality of males and females is considered to be fundamentally different, and these understandings are based on somewhat of a double standard (Knodel et al. 1996). Men are widely perceived as having a natural and driving need for sex that requires a frequent outlet. Thus, sexual intercourse for men is viewed as part of their inherent nature, essentially as a basic physiological need or an instinct. In contrast, women are viewed as also having sexual feelings but of a weaker and more controllable nature than the sex drive felt by men. Thai women need to be in control of their sexual feelings, and women also need to be on their guard against men who would take advantage of them. This reflects the traditional value placed on female virginity before

marriage, even though it is now more common in Thailand for unmarried couples to engage in sexual relations. Women's premarital sexual practices still face criticism from some conservative Thais as undermining good Thai culture and women's worth (Piayura 2012).

Moreover, sexual issues are hardly ever openly discussed in Thai culture, especially among women. To be considered "morally good", Thai women are not supposed to have personal sexual desires, much less act upon them. Talking or writing about sex is considered culturally and morally improper (Harrison 1997). This taboo was evident in my research. When I interviewed my participants, I found that it was quite difficult to initiate questions about premarital sexual practices, especially in the first physical meeting. Most women I interviewed seemed to be uncomfortable to talk about this issue. They only mentioned that "they had traveled and spent time together when they first met in person".

However, there were some women who I only knew and interviewed online who were rather more open to discussing and describing their experiences of premarital sex. This might be because of two reasons. First, most of them were living overseas when I interviewed them. I had never met and probably never will meet them in person. Accordingly, they might feel more free to discuss private, embarrassing, and sensitive issues in online contexts as opposed to in face-to-face interviews (Hewson et al. 2003). Second, the degree of social acceptance for premarital sexual relationships in Thailand is often based on the level of commitment. For women, premarital sexual practices that lead to marriage are more proper and acceptable, while casual sex without any commitment is difficult to accept (Knodel et al. 1996). Almost all of the women who expressed their premarital sexual behaviors had married or were engaged to their online daters at the time of the interviews, thus probably making it more acceptable to talk about their sexuality with me.

Karn, who I got to know on a Thai online community, was one of the women who was more open about her sexual experiences. She had married Ralph and was living in the USA. when I first met her online. After I asked her to be my participant, she gave me her private e-mail address. I did an online interview with her via e-mail and Skype. Compared with other Thai women in my study, Karn seemed to be more open about discussing her sexuality with me. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Karn had first physically met her husband in Bangkok after three months of chatting online. Ralph made a trip for the first meeting when his daughter was on school holidays and staying with his ex-wife for a

week. He booked the hotel near her home in Bangkok. Karn first met him at the airport, and then they took a taxi to the hotel. They did not go out on the first night because Ralph was tired from traveling. They just stayed talking at the hotel lobby for two hours, after which she left the hotel before returning to meet him in the morning.

On the second day, they went out together to tour Bangkok. When they were back at the hotel in the evening, Ralph asked her whether she wanted to stay the night at the hotel. As Karn said, she did not plan to stay the night with him on the first meeting. However, when she met him in person, she felt that there was some chemistry between them and that he was the right man for her. Furthermore, the way that he treated her when they spent time together made her feel magical, like they were already in a relationship. Thus, she decided to stay the night with him. Karn spoke of her reasons as follows:

> Seriously, I didn't plan to stay the night with him on our first meeting. I wanted to get to know him better and most importantly, I would have to love him first. But, when we went to *Wat Phra Kaew* [Grand palace] on the Saturday morning and then we caught a Chao Phraya express boat to get around and explore many places in Bangkok. He made me feel like we were already in a relationship. He held my hand all the time. We felt closer to each other. When we got back the hotel at 7pm, he asked me if I wanted to stay the night with him. Of course, I was hesitant to say yes. But I thought he had only one week to stay in Thailand, and I had to work on weekdays too. So, it was only weekends and at night that we could spend more time together. It was a short time. I really wanted to spend all of my time with him. That was why I decided to stay the night with him. (Karn, online interview, November 2011)

For Karn, it seemed that she probably used the word "stayed the night" to indicate "engaged in sexual activities". In the first month of online interviews, she was still reluctant to let me know about sexual aspects of her romantic love. There always seemed to be ambiguities in her words that could be interpreted in many ways. However, after we chatted for a few months, she was more unguarded and finally told me that she had sex with Ralph when she stayed the second night at his hotel.

> We didn't have sex on the first night that I stayed with him. He told me if I wasn't ready, he could wait. He just wanted to cuddle and sleep beside me. And he kept his promise. He just kissed and cuddled me all night. That was

a wonderful moment. I felt I loved him so much. The second night after we went out, he asked me again if I wanted to stay the night at the hotel. I told him I had no clothes to change because I had to go to work in the morning. He took me to Siam [shopping center], and bought me new clothes. I called my friend [who lived with her] and let her know I wasn't going back home. We had sex that night. (Karn, online interview, January 2012)

Premarital sex in this first meeting was described by Karn to be as a result of love. Although her sexual intimacy with Ralph happened outside marriage, it was still inside the space of "love". She also expressed the view that sex was of little importance to a woman. She did not seek it, but she did because she thought he might want it.

Sex wasn't important to me, but I thought he probably wanted it. It was normal for men, especially *farang*. He spent a lot of money to visit me in Thailand, and I knew he did not plan to meet another girl. Only me!! I told myself if he didn't contact me when he returned to his country, at least I had a good time with him. He made me so happy when we spent time together, and I enjoyed his company. I was lucky that I met him. (Karn, online interview, January 2012)

The story of Karn reflects the cultural model of romance and the interpretation of gender sexualities. As Holland and Eisenhart (1990) suggest, a woman and a man who are sexually attracted to one another both desire intimacy, but when a woman acts upon her sexual attraction to a man, she permits intimacy. That is, physical intimacy is what a woman gives and a man gets, whereas "good treatment" is something a man gives and a woman gets. Female sexuality is interpreted differently from male sexuality, and the outcome is that female sexuality is more constrained because it occurs in the framework of how the man treats her.

In addition to the cultural model of romance, Karn's experiences also reflect a general stereotype about cross-cultural relationships. Seeking sex is seen as either the dominant motive or a very prominent one for Western men in their relations with Thai women. This might be because of the popular construction of predatory Western men and exotic Asian women in cross-cultural relationships, and the reputation of Thailand as a place where Western men can easily find sexual services. These stereotypes about gender, race, and sexuality play an important role in intimate relationships between Thai women and Western men. Although some women I interviewed felt that they were in love with their online daters, they also

sometimes seemed concerned about becoming "a holiday girlfriend". In the case of Karn, even though she felt confident that Ralph was seeking a long-term relationship, she did wonder if he might disappear from her life when he returned to his country. She acknowledged the risk that she might become his holiday girlfriend. However, the wonderful feeling of romantic love caused her to ignore this possibility, and she decided to stay the night and have sex with him.

In short, "love" is often used as a way of legitimating premarital sexual relations, especially when women first physically meet their online daters and have not yet planned to get married. As previously mentioned, the degree of social acceptance for premarital intimacy in Thailand depends on the level of commitment. It is now more acceptable in Thailand for unmarried couples to engage in sexual relations, but this usually refers to couples who have a strong commitment to each other. Casual premarital sexual relationships without any commitment are seen as improper behavior (Knodel et al. 1996). The moral distinction between sex undertaken as a prelude to marriage and sex in more casual relationships can be a reason why women try to claim that their premarital sexual relations are not casual sex without any commitment. Even though they have just met their online dater in person, they have known and learnt about each other before they first physically met, and they also had a deep emotional bond. Sex, for women, is interpreted as showing emotion and affection to the person whom they are actually already in love with.

The Role of Time and Distance in the First Physical Meeting

The story of Karn described above also shows that the process of moving from online to offline in the case of intermarriage online daters involves increasing intensity. At first, the physical meeting is held to see if they can take the relationship further. Such meetings represent a significant "test" of whether the online chemistry between them can survive the transition offline. Karn did not plan to stay the night or have sexual relations with Ralph at the first physical meeting, and many things changed after they had spent a week together. During the last few days of their first physical meeting, finally, they started to talk about marriage and planned for the next meeting. Karn took a day off and brought Ralph home to meet her parents in her hometown.

Karn was one of 14 women I interviewed who introduced their online daters to family and friends at the first physical meeting, but Ping was the only woman who married her online dater during their first physical meeting.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Ping made a plan to meet Glenn for the first time at Songkhla province. She drove from her hometown to Songkhla and booked two hotel rooms in a town to stay for three nights. My first face-to-face interview with her was in March 2012, before she had her first physical meeting with Glenn in April 2012. Ping told me she did not want her family and friends to know about the relationship until she felt completely confident that Glenn was what she expected. At that time, I did not think she would marry Glenn at the first meeting. When I interviewed her again when she was online after ten days of the first meeting, I was very surprised when Ping told me she was marrying Glenn in a few weeks. When I asked her what happened in their first meeting, she replied:

> When we spent time in Songkhla, he treated me well and made me felt warm and calm. I realized what a kind man he was, and our souls totally clicked. The third day that we spent time in Songkhla, we talked more openly, especially about how we really felt about each other. We both felt that our feelings were not different from online. Even though we sometimes had language barriers because I couldn't express exactly what I wanted to say, he didn't get frustrated or angry at me. He tried to understand what I was saying. We were really in love with each other. So, we decided to continue and move to another stage. I drove him to my hometown and introduced him to my brother and friends. (Ping, online interview, April 2012)

Ping decided to bring him home and introduced Glenn to her family and friends after she had spent three days with him. However, she avoided telling them that she met Glenn via an intermarriage dating site, and she was still concerned about what other people thought of her relationship.

> I was nervous and excited when I brought him home. I had never told anybody about our relationship. My brother and friends were surprised when they first met Glenn. I just told them that Anna [her close friend] introduced Glenn to me and we had known each other for a long time. Glenn didn't stay the night at my brother's home because we didn't have enough room, and I wasn't comfortable to share a room with him. We're not married or engaged yet!! I thought my brother didn't want me to do that. So, I drove him to the hotel near my brother's home. He stayed the night there and I stayed the night at my brother's home. Of course, he asked me to stay the night with him, but I couldn't do that even if I wanted to. I told him that my hometown was a small town. I had many friends and relatives here. I didn't want them to see me staying the night in the hotel with him. I was a bit worried about what other people would think of me. (Ping, online interview, April 2012)

The relationship between Ping and Glenn seemed to be more intense and serious after Ping decided to bring Glenn home and told her family and friends about her relationship. However, at this stage, Ping was still reluctant to have sexual relations with Glenn. As she said, if she succumbed to premarital sex before a formal commitment was made, she risked social disapproval, especially in her hometown. This might be one of many reasons why they finally decided to get married during their first time together in Thailand. As Ping said:

> Glenn was a great man! He understood my perspectives. He learned about Thai culture before he came here. He told me if I was worried about that [premarital sex], we should get engaged or married. I thought he was just kidding me, so I said nothing. Then he asked me again, and he said he was serious about it. He couldn't wait to see me again next year. It would be a very long time before we could meet each other again because Glenn would be back to work on a ship for ten months. I agreed with him. Glenn turns 50 years old this year, and I am 37 years old now. We know what we want in our lives. We both want to have our own kids. We are ready to make the move. That is why we are going to marry in two weeks. (Ping, online interview, April 2012)

The case of Ping reflects the fact that the progress of the romance between intermarriage online daters is potentially more intense. Before the initial meeting in person, Ping and Glenn only committed to spend the first three days together, but romantic feelings caused them to continue their relationship and decide to make a public commitment to demonstrate their intentions. At the same time, this progress was also compressed by the role of time and distance in cross-cultural relationships. As Ping said, if they did not decide to move to the next stage of relationship, then it would be a very long time before that could be again possible.

Thus, the travel involved in meeting means that more is at stake, differing significantly from local online dating. The first moment of meeting in person is more romantic and intense when online couples could feel physical sensations from each other after they have chatted online for a period of time. The first physical meeting is a significant test of whether the "online chemistry" between them can make the transition to offline. Moreover, when online couples have spent whole days or weeks together, their relationships quickly progress to a deeper level of intimacy and commitment after they feel that the person they fell in love with online is

the same person offline. This illustrates the complex interplay between online and offline relationships. Online relationships shape the first offline encounters, and in turn the offline contexts can lead to a shift in the emotional dynamics of relationships. After online couples have met each other in person and felt the power of physical sensations, they feel that the Internet could not substitute for the physical presence of their online daters. Thus, in the next chapter, I move to explore a newly acquired perception of physically missing each other that emerges when online couples return to communicating online.

Notes

1. See the list of eligible countries at Immigration Bureau, http://www.immigration.go.th/nov2004/en/base.php?page=voa
2. In this book, I use the term "normative" romantic love instead of "traditional" romantic love. See the description in Chap. 1.

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Love and Commitment Across Distance

> I think love is something that we have to share with someone on a mental level, not only a physical one. Even when William is not here, I feel that he is always on my mind. I always picture myself doing my normal routine with him. And even down to the little things, like eating lunch or dinner, I often catch myself day-dreaming about sharing my food with him. Of course, I always feel hurt when I see other people holding hands, hugging, and teasing each other because I want to do those with him. But I know one day we will live together. (Na, online interview, December 2011)

The previous chapter portrays the process of moving to the first encounter offline. It shows that the first meeting in person is more romantic and intense when online daters can feel physical sensations from each other and spend whole days or weeks together. After the first physical meeting, thus, most of the women in my study intended to pursue their relationships further. However, the romance did not survive for all couples. In this chapter, I examine the dynamics of relationships after the first physical meeting and focus on the process of sustaining relationships at a distance. How do women manage to sustain "love" and "commitment" across distance? How do they discuss and negotiate the discontinuity of physical co-presence?

What I argue here is that when women feel greater commitment to their partners and consider that they are now in a relationship, women's narratives about relationships across distance tend to fluctuate between being sad and being hopeful. Although the stories sometimes reflect the

difficulty of separation and the loneliness and frustration of communication at a distance, the women also express a sense of promise that the couples are imagining their future together (Constable 2003). The women tend to frame their long-distance relationships within a discourse of love and commitment. They select and reject various features of love in order to be able to sustain this framework in spite of the lack of physical proximity. Indeed, rather than being perceived as a problem, the women seem to redefine the successful negotiation of distance as "proof" of their love and deep commitment to the relationship.

In order to explore the maintenance of love and commitment in long-distance relationships, I focus first on the stories of women who continued a distance relationship after the first physical meeting. This discussion illustrates that when women have to manage the process of moving in and out of physical co-presence, they are likely to increase the sense of co-presence. The sensation of physical co-presence, the frequency and consistency of virtual and proxy co-presence, and the imagining of a future together are all possible strategies for maintaining their relationships. This seems to help women to shift "romantic love" into "caring love", which is more strongly associated with long-term relationships such as marriage and is an important factor in ensuring that a long-distance relationship survives. Thus, although Western men tend to exercise more power than Thai women in the relationships, women do not view themselves as oppressed or dominated. Instead, they subordinate themselves to love. If they do not sacrifice anything for love, that is a sign that they are not really in love. Then, I explore the process of falling out of love, experienced by six women who felt both physically and emotionally distanced from their online daters after they had met in person. The experiences of these women reflect the multidimensional nature of intimacy, as well as pointing to the persistence of structures of inequalities based on gender and nationality.

MAINTAINING INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AT A DISTANCE

Fah met her partner, Joe, on an intermarriage dating site in 2007 when she was 28 years old, and Joe was 29 years old. Their relationship was the longest long-distance relationship in this study. They had been chatting online for nearly seven months before Joe traveled to Thailand for three weeks to visit her for the first time. After this meeting, they both agreed they wanted to continue their relationship. Four months later, Joe

returned for a second visit, during which time they decided to become engaged. Fah explained that Joe wanted her to migrate and live with him in the Netherlands, but he was worried that his income was too low. Joe therefore decided to quit his job and return to college. Before the first semester started, he made a third visit during which he spent two months with her in Thailand. After he returned to his country, Fah applied for a visa to visit him in the Netherlands, but her visa was rejected because Joe was still a student. Over the next year, Joe visited her in Thailand three times during university holidays. Fah then applied again for a visa when Joe secured a new job. This time she was successful and was able to travel to visit him and his family for nearly three months between February and April. When she spent time with him in the Netherlands, she also took a short course to study the Dutch language. After she returned to Thailand, she took the Civic Integration Examination Abroad[1] in May to apply for a Provisional Resident Permit (MVV). Her MVV visa was granted in July. In September she migrated to the Netherlands and was planning to apply for a permanent resident permit.

This seemed to be a pattern for cross-cultural relationships online. Before online couples first meet each other in person, they become emotionally close and emotionally intimate through frequent and intense online communications. Then, when they first physically meet each other in person, the progress of romance is potentially more intense and rapid because most online couples tend to spend whole days or weeks together. Many couples decide to make a public commitment to demonstrate their intentions in a short period of time after that. For example, Fah and Joe became engaged only four months after they first met each other in person. Ping and Glenn married during the month of their first physical meeting. Pla and William married during his second visit to Thailand, and the other ten couples in this study also married or became engaged at the second or third meeting in person.

However, once the couples had decided to marry or become engaged, they still had to wait for a suitable time to migrate to live together, and they also had to wait for an approval of the visa to allow couples to legally enter the country (Constable 2003). Most women in this study encountered the experience of dealing with the absence of the physical presence of their loved ones. In the following section, I highlight the experiences of four women, Fah, Na, Jao, and Dang, who experienced love at a distance for two years or more. At the time of interview, Fah, Jao, and Dang had already migrated to live with their husband overseas, while Na married

William on his third visit, but they were still living apart. Na was still nego-tiating the process of moving in and out of William's physical co-presence.

Baldassar (2008) suggests that an analysis of the feeling of "missing" and "longing" for loved ones in transnational relationships needs to con-sider emotions in four key ways: discursively (through words), physically (through the body), as well as through actions (practice) and imagina-tion (ideas). Baldassar's study draws on a sample of Italian migrants living in Australia and their ageing parents living in Italy. Her study considers emotional experiences connected to the absence of loved ones through the dominant perspectives of theories of emotion constructionism with its emphasis on discourse, and of embodiment with its emphasis on sensory experience. Baldassar argues that a sense of shared "presence" in order to cope with the feeling of "missing" can be constructed in four main types of co-presence: virtually, by proxy, physically, and through imagination. These types of co-presence reinforce a sense of closeness and act to main-tain transnational relationships.

Drawing from the study of Baldassar (2008), I found that cross-cultural couples in my study also handled the discontinuity of physical co-presence in these four ways. Intimate relationships are not only con-structed through physical interactions between the two partners but are also "stretched" across time and space (Sigman 1991). The seemingly continuous nature of relationships is often conducted in the discontinu-ous moments of non-co-present relating. Thus, in order to maintain rela-tionships at a distance, cross-cultural partners have to move in and out of one another's co-presence and enact some behavior in order to preserve a sense of being in a relationship given the discontinuity between physically co-present interactions.

To extend this point, this section examines women's experiences in dealing with and negotiating the process of moving in and out of their online couple's physical co-presence, and how they nevertheless maintain their cross-cultural relationships. First, it begins with the importance of "physical co-presence" in the survival of cross-cultural relationships across time and space. Each visit might be assumed to be a case of practical care and emotional demonstrations of Western men's affection. Women who experience periodic visits of their partners are likely to have an increased sense of "presence" in their relationships. Later, this section examines the exchange of virtual and proxy co-presence to revise their knowledge of themselves, their partners, and their relationship, as well as imagining emotional affection and their future together. Virtual, proxy, and imagined

co-presence appear to be used as strategies to sustain relationships at a distance and to increase the incidence of physical co-presence, and therefore reduce the likelihood of breaking up.

Physical Co-presence: The Importance of Visiting

As Saroca (2012) argues, although online communications create and develop intimate relationships between online partners and lead up to the first physical meeting, after this meeting, the Internet is not able to substitute for the lack of physical presence. There is a shift in the emotional dynamics of online relationships, especially the feeling of physically missing each other. This feeling can be referred to as a type of heartache and the pain of physical separation (Baldassar 2008). For example, Jao reported how she was extremely sad when she had just spent time with Harry and had to be apart from him:

> I really missed him after he returned to his country. I cried when we were at the airport. It was painful to see him leaving. I had many feelings. I felt uncertain about our relationship when he left. I was scared and worried about whether he would contact me again. When he first messaged me after he arrived in his country, it made me feel a bit better. But then, I felt down again when I thought I wouldn't be able to see or touch him for a long time. I was so frustrated when we had to go back to the Internet. It really hurt when I saw him on Skype, but couldn't touch him. (Jao, online interview, December 2011)

Jao's experience reflected that after online couples had met each other in person, there was significant frustration due to communicating at a distance when the couples had to return to communicating online. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, cross-cultural online dating is different from local online dating. The first moment of physical meeting is more romantic and intense when online couples feel physical sensations from each other after they have chatted online for a period of time. When long-distance travel is involved in meetings, cross-cultural online couples tend to spend whole days or weeks together. For this reason, their relationships quickly progress to a deeper level of intimacy and commitment. The lack of physical presence after the first meeting in person, therefore, probably makes them feel more depressed because after the intensity of their first physical meeting with their online partners, they are once again suddenly alone. Jao described her feelings of missing Harry as worse than during

the time when she was developing her online relationship with him and they had not yet met in person.

Moreover, at that time of being separated, Harry was uncertain when he would be returning to visit her a second time. This made her anxious and uncertain about her relationship with him:

> He told me before he left [the first meeting] that he would come to see me again as soon as he could, but he couldn't tell me when he would be doing that. That was why I felt very sad when I saw him leaving. I didn't know when we would meet each other again. Anyway, three months later, he told me that he would be taking a holiday on his birthday and he would come to see me in Thailand for a week. I was very happy with that news. I stopped crying, started to count down, and planned our trip. You know … even though I wanted time to go quickly, I didn't feel hurt anymore. My feelings had changed after I knew when we would be seeing each other again. (Jao, online interview, December 2011)

It seems that longing for physical co-presence is most often expressed by women as a need to confirm that their intimate relationships can survive at a distance. As Baldassar (2008) explains, physical co-presence seems to be the best way of resolving tensions and maintaining relationships at a distance. In international relationships, physical co-presence through visits often motivates an increase in virtual communication both before and immediately following the meeting. For example, after Harry made plans for the second visit, Jao and Harry started to organize many details about the trip, such as accommodation and an itinerary, to prepare for their next physical meeting. Then, after visiting, Jao felt more confident about her online relationship with Harry because the second meeting in person probably reassured her that physical co-presence would be repeated again. A degree of relationship uncertainty had been significantly decreased after Harry made a plan for the next visit.

Furthermore, at the time of physical co-presence, cross-cultural couples always try to do certain activities that help make sure that they have a good time together. The fact that visits across borders usually represent time taken out of everyday routines can in turn provide a greater propensity for intimacy and the development of close relationships than that which is available to proximate relationships (Baldassar et al. 2007). For example, in the case of Jao, after she knew that Harry would come to visit her again, she tried to work harder to manage her time for him:

We made plans for our second meeting. He wanted to go and stay in *Ko Chang* [Chang Island] for five days. After we made plans, I worked harder to get work done before he came for a holiday. I wanted to have a good time with him because I knew there wasn't the possibility to see each other every day. So, when we had the opportunity to spend time together, I really wanted to focus all of my attention on him. (Jao, online interview, December 2011)

Thus, distance seems to create a desire in cross-cultural couples to want to have "quality time" with their loved ones when they are together. This reinforces the notion that seeing each other less frequently could probably lead to better quality exchanges (Baldassar et al. 2007). During their time together, they do not want anything "negative" to happen and tend to be on their best behavior because they spend such a significant time being apart (Sahlstein 2004). In Jao's case, Harry decided to propose marriage on the last night of their trip in *Ko Chang*, and then they had a serious discussion about their future together. As Jao said, this might be a possible result of having high-quality, happy times together.

In addition to quality time, physical co-presence also allows online couples to express their sense of closeness or intimacy through their bodies. The simple physical acts of seeing each other and of being physically co-present make the visits distinct from other forms of transnational communication (Baldassar et al. 2007). This could be most clearly seen in the case of Na. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Na described the first moment of the first visit as "magic" when she could feel physical sensations from William. She believed that she had finally met her *Nua Koo* who would complement her perfectly. Then, when they had spent time together during the first meeting, the physical co-presence was interpreted as the "test" of whether the person whom they felt in love with online was the same person offline. While the physical existence of the second visit was significantly different, the physical sensation of touch seemed to be described as "reassurance", as Na said:

After he left here [the first physical meeting], I was always crying because I missed him so much. Many things reminded me of him. Even though, before he left, he told me he would come to see me again in six months, I sometimes hesitated to believe his words because I had some bad experiences before. I feared he would change his mind because we were far away from each other. That was why when I met him at the airport [for the second visit], I was very relieved and happy when I could see him and touch him again. When he hugged me, I felt he was the same person that I had known for a long time. (Na, online interview, November 2011)

For Na, physical co-presence in the second visit seemed to reassure her that William had not changed. He remained "the same" despite the separation of time and geographical distance. This reflects the fact that physical co-presence in cross-cultural relationships is not only important in the transformation of relationships from online to offline contexts, but it is also a crucial reason why relationships can survive and overcome distance. Dang's story helps to further illustrate this point. Dang turned to an intermarriage dating site after she divorced her ex-husband. Before she met Bruno, she had been dating an English man. At the time of their first physical meeting, she traveled to Pattaya with him and her two children because her mother was not available to look after her children. Once the man returned to his country, he e-mailed her that he could not handle the fact that she had two children and he did not want to be a father to them. Dang felt disappointed and returned to an intermarriage dating site after he stopped contacting her. Six months later, she met her husband, Bruno, on the site and chatted to him over two months before she first physically met him in Thailand. After the first meeting, Bruno kept visiting her in Thailand twice a year before she migrated to America on a fiancé visa and married him there.[2] She spoke about her feelings of frustration in the relationship after Bruno first returned to his country:

> I really missed him, but I didn't have time to be sad. My day was busy when I was in Thailand. I had to work and look after my two kids. Even though Bruno told me he would come to see me again, I didn't really believe him. He was single and younger than me by nearly 6 years while I was a single mum. I had only [physically] met one English man before I knew Bruno. He told me he liked me and wanted to see me again. Anyway, when he was back in his country, he just told me he wasn't sure if he wanted to spend time with me and my kids again. He didn't contact me like before, and finally he stopped contacting me at all. So, when Bruno visited for a second time and kept visiting me every six months, it made me feel more sure of our relationship. (Dang, online interview, August 2011)

In order for relationships to be maintained, online couples must manage their uncertainty through constant efforts toward achieving physical co-presence. In the cases of the women who had been in long-distance relationships for more than two years, they met their online partners at least twice a year during the time when they were apart. In some cases, the women traveled to visit the men and their family before deciding to migrate to live there. Thus, although the physical meeting in cross-cultural

relationships is often determined by Western men, the values of physical co-presence tend to dilute the imbalance of power in the relationships. The feeling of physical sensation and the frequency and consistency of a physical presence probably increase women's sense of relationship security and certainty, which in turn can affect women's beliefs about their relationship, their emotions, and the quality of communication (Dainton and Aylor 2001). Therefore, women who experience periodic visits from their online partners are more likely to experience success than those with no physical contact, although they must deal with periods of discontinuity in physical co-presence. By spending time together, women tend to believe that their partners are still strongly committed to them. This helps women regain faith and trust in their partners and in their relationships; it also can increase virtual and proxy communications during times of long-distance separations.

Virtual Co-presence: Sustaining a Commitment and Staying Connected

As previously mentioned, there is a shift in the emotional dynamics of relationships between online partners after they first meet each other in person. Some women in my study seemed frustrated when they had to return to communicating at a distance. However, the Internet still plays an important role in maintaining a sense of being in a relationship. The most frequent and common contacts are still conducted through communication technologies. According to the women interviewed, video chat, instant and short messages, e-mail, and other forms of online communications represent important tools in sustaining a deep commitment and updating their knowledge about their online partners and their relationships.

Given the geographic distances that separate online cross-cultural couples, the virtual forms of co-presence among the couples after the first meeting tend to be conducted more often through video-mediated communication, especially video chat. As mentioned in Chap. 4, women in my study preferred to use text-based communications rather than the phone or a voice medium because of language difficulties. They felt more comfortable writing about their feelings and emotions in another language rather than using voice-based communication. Video chat allowed them to communicate via chatting while still being visible to each other on the camera. Thus, this form of online communication is more likely to be frequently used to maintain cross-cultural relationships at a distance

because it may actually afford unique opportunities to connect with their partners' physical location and in doing so, create a shared sense of visual presence between the partners, which can diminish space-time distancing (Neustaedter and Greenberg 2012). For example, even though Jao sometimes felt hurt when she saw Harry via video chat, they still kept chatting and seeing each other using this program when they were apart. She explained her feelings:

> We tried to keep chatting via Skype every day because we needed to see each other. Even though every day we also messaged each other [by phone], it wasn't enough for us. I need to see his face, his eyes and his smile, and he also told me he felt the same. So we agreed to organize our time so we could see each other every day [via Skype] for at least half an hour before he went to bed, and we talked about our daily lives. And also, if we were at home on the weekends, we always turned on the video on Skype to see each other all day. Sometimes we just saw each other doing some house work, watching television, taking a nap or just smiling, without talking or chatting. It made me feel like we were together. (Jao, online interview, December 2011)

Jao described video chat as a way to see Harry's facial expressions and bodily movements. For her, virtual co-presence was not only about hearing and chatting to each other, but it also created a sense of sight that made them feel emotionally closer to each other. As Jao said, they had both developed routines around times that they could be available to each other. This was not so different from couples living together; Jao and Harry tried, and indeed expected, to see each other every evening and kept the connection open for 30 minutes or more before they said goodnight to each other; they also shared some activities during the weekend over the video chat program. Jao felt like they were part of each other's lives. They could keep informed about new things in their partner's life, even when it was a small thing, such as a new haircut or clothes. Also, they could share their own locations by doing a video tour of their surrounds. Thus, seeing each other and sharing everyday life via video chat can help online partners feel more certain about each other and about their relationship, and therefore this reduces the occurrence of thoughts of distrust.

Moreover, in some couples, video chat is used to introduce their online partner to their family and friends. For example, when Joe returned to his country, he introduced Fah to his family via Skype before they became engaged on the second visit. Fah related the story:

At our first meeting, we agreed that we both wanted to continue our rela-
tionship. He told his family about us. His mum and sister wanted to get
to know me and I also wanted to get to know them, so we set a time one
weekend. I remember I was really excited and prepared myself to see them
online. I put makeup on and did my hair an hour before. I turned Skype on
before our appointment time. Joe was on there. He told me his mum and
sister would be back home in 10 minutes. He smiled and teased me about
wearing a dress at night. Normally I always wore my pyjamas when we were
on Skype because it was nearly my bed-time. Our time difference was 5
hours. He always got home and was ready for Skype at 6 pm. That meant
I had to wait until 11 pm … Anyway, when his family got home, he intro-
duced me to them. We just said hello to each other. I firstly spoke in Dutch,
and they replied to me in Thai. And then we chatted for about 10 minutes.
They asked me some questions in Dutch, and Joe typed in English. When
I replied in English, Joe read it and told them in Dutch. It was a good, fun
time. I won't forget it. (Fah, online interview, October 2011)

After the online introduction, his mother and sister sometimes said
hello to Fah, and Joe passed on the message. Getting to know Joe's family
was important to Fah. This is probably because, in Thai culture, although
people can select their own prospective partners, marriage is still under-
stood to be a family matter (Suksomboon 2009). As I discussed in Chap.
5,14 women whom I interviewed introduced their online partners to their
family and friends at the first physical meeting after the couples agreed
they both wanted to continue their relationship. Thai culture concerning
the family seems to be different from that of Western culture. For Thai
people, it is important to introduce their dating partners to the family
early in the relationship and see how they all mesh before the relationship
becomes very serious. As Fah said, even though she was introduced to his
family online, she was still very excited because she really wanted to know
if Joe's family could accept his choice of a relationship with a Thai woman
before they moved to the next stage.

Fah and Jao's stories demonstrate how video chat represents a unique
place for the creation of virtual co-presence because of its ability to trans-
mit a "sense of sight". Seeing each other, sharing every day activities,
and introducing partners to the family are a form of online communica-
tion that closely approximates face-to-face interaction (Fagersten 2010).
Video chat seemingly diminishes the limitations of distance and makes
couples feel closer to each other more than other communication tech-
nologies (Neustaedter and Greenberg 2012). Although, in some cases,

scheduling times for communication over video chat is not an easy task because of considerable time zone differences; nevertheless, the couples still set a time at least once a week to see each other via video chat. For example, scheduling video chat was really difficult for Dang because it was a 12-hour time difference, and she also had two children living with her. She was available to use video chat after her two children went to bed, but at that time Bruno was at work. Hence, Dang and Bruno only used video chat on Sundays, and they commonly used short messages and e-mail to stay connected to each other during the day when they both could read and reply at their leisure.

As Wilding (2006) argued, new forms of online communication do not necessarily displace old forms. After the first meeting in person, most women I interviewed seemed to prefer video chat as the principle means of contacting their partners because it made them feel more connected. However, they still employed a variety of online communication tools to stay connected and maintain faith and trust in their long-distance relationships. For example, although Jao and Fah used video chat every night, they still used instant messaging via mobile phones for short greetings, such as "good morning" or "miss you", and also for quick questions during the day, or just to stay in reasonably constant contact. At the same time, they sometimes used e-mails to exchange long stories about their everyday lives or to communicate deeper feelings. As a result of increasing their online communication, the couples seemed to stay more connected and more informed about each other. These actions worked to sustain their relationships across distance.

Co-presence by Proxy: Creating the Presence of Absent People

When I met Na in person in April 2012, she had just married William and was still living in Thailand while William commuted back and forth between Thailand and Sweden. I first met Na in person at a coffee shop near her work. She told me that William always waited there for her to finish at work. She noted that the place had meaning for her in our phone conversation:

> If you want to catch up in the evening after I finish work, we can meet at the cafe near my work. I could be there at 6.00 pm if I have no customers. Anyway, if the last appointment is 5.30, I will be there around 6.30 pm. You can sit and wait for me there. It is a good cafe and it also has free wifi. When William was here, he always waited for me there if I finished work late. (Na, phone interviews, April 2012)

This is similar to other women I met in person, who also had stories about our meeting places that were linked to their partners. For example, Jin told me that the place that I met her was the first place that she had lunch with Sanj, and she also talked about his favorite Thai food when we started to order our lunch.

> When I came here with Sanj, he ordered seafood *Padthai*. He told me he had never seen a menu like this before. He loved seafood and *Padthai*, but there was only *Padthai* with prawn or meat in it at the Thai restaurant near his place in England. *Padthai* is a signature dish of this restaurant. That was why I brought him here when he first came to visit me, and he really liked it. (Jin, Face-to-face interview, February 2012)

This illustrates how memories linked to place can come to embody the presence of those who are absent. It often generates more intense feelings of missing and longing and subsequently inspires the exchange of virtual communications (Baldassar 2008). When Jin ordered seafood *Padthai* even though it was not her favorite food, she took a photo to send to Sanj via Facebook messenger while we had lunch. Then, Sanj replied that he wished he would be there and have his *Padthai* with her.

In addition to memories of place, co-presence by proxy is also achieved indirectly through special objects, such as photos and gifts. For example, when I met Na in person, she showed me her wedding photo that she kept in her wallet and laughed when talking about it:

> I keep our wedding photo in my wallet. I love the fact that I can still see me and him together even when he is not with me because he is the most special person in my life. I keep this photo with me all the time so that I can look at it when I miss him. Also, when I talk to people about him, I love to show them this photo. I also have many photos of us on my mobile phone, but I use this photo as wallpaper. And I put this photo up at home and at work. Even my laptop has this photo as the background. (Na, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

For Na, her wedding photo was clear evidence of the deep commitment between her and William. As Na said, she always showed the photo to her friends or other people who did not know him to let people know that she was married. Also, she always wore her wedding ring to show that she valued the covenant of her marriage. Even when she was alone, wearing a wedding ring was a visible way to constantly

remind her that William was always in her thoughts whether they were physically together or apart.

Thus, wedding photos and her wedding ring are important signifiers for Na. This is due to two reasons. First, it is the cultural meaning that is attached to special objects. Weddings have become a central feature of the ideology of romantic love. The act of marrying or the wedding itself is perceived as emblematic of love and commitment (Ingraham 2008). Thus, wedding objects are construed as a symbol of this love and commitment. At the same time, the importance and the "tangibility" of special objects can trigger feelings of "being closer" to their partners. As Baldassar (2008, 258) notes, in transnational relationships, their ability to be "felt", or at least to be used as a conduit for emotion and feeling by proxy, seems to be more important than the object's actual content. The feeling of touching, seeing, and holding may generate expressions of emotion and obligation and thus take the physical place of the desired person. Thus, wedding photos and rings can be special objects that women can touch and see on a daily basis and which, represent by proxy, the emotion of missing and longing for their loved ones.

Imagined Co-presence: Longing for the Future

The notion of imagination provides an important way to understand how couples negotiate and maintain relationships across distance. As Feagin and Maynard (1997, 41) described, imagination is "that which represents the absent as present, with all the thoughts and feeling it would bring if it were present". Thus, according to this view, imagination leans and relies on sensations, feelings, and emotions to make present that which is absent (Illouz 2009). This view of imagination is especially salient in the realm of love across distance because imagination has the capacity to act as a substitute for the real experience via a real object, generating sensations that are close to what they would be in real life (Illouz 2012). Consider Na's story, as noted in the beginning of the chapter; she always imagined herself doing her normal routine with William, such as having dinner or sharing some activities, when they were apart. The act of daydreaming about her everyday life with him was a key way for her to keep William in her mind. This could enable her to ensure that she was with him every day. Moreover, Na imagined her future with William. She sometimes imagined herself living with him and taking care of him, especially when they communicated via video chat.

When we talk on Skype, sometimes I see him feeling exhausted after work, but he still has to do some housework. I always tell him if I was there, I would clean his place, cook him dinner, even small things like wake him up … I would do for him. It is a bit strange. I had never thought I wanted to prepare this and that for someone, but I always imagine myself taking good care of him. I hope it will happen soon. (Na, online interview, December 2011)

Na's story demonstrates that when relationships are stretched by distance, couples must create more abstractly imagined forms of emotional care to underwrite their future together. This allows them to articulate their interdependence through mutual care within their everyday lives (Holmes 2010). However, in Na's imagination, the picture of her future with William was highly gendered. It seemed to adhere to the traditional values of performing caring work. Na committed herself to a concept of "good caring wife" and the "duty" to prove her love and care to William.

This is also evident in Fah's relationship. As mentioned earlier, Fah and Joe had the most protracted long-distance relationship in this study. They had been experiencing intermittent physical co-presence for nearly five years, even though they became engaged on the second visit. Fah recalled her experiences of being in a long-distance relationship:

He said he wished I could move to live with him, but it was difficult at that time because his income might not be enough for two people. So, he decided to quit his job and return to college. Even though I had to wait many years for him until he finished his degree and got a new job, I felt more confident about our relationship. I could imagine our future together. (Fah, online interview, October 2011)

Fah's case highlights how emphasizing the future of the relationship is an important strategy to reduce relationship uncertainty and maintain their bond across distance. The time spent apart was redefined as time utilized to build a future together. However, their imagined future seemed to confirm traditional gendered ideology. Joe's task in the future was to be the "breadwinner", so he decided to return a college to create better opportunities for a new career with a higher income. At the same time, Fah expected to migrate to live with Joe in the Netherlands and perhaps stay at home and look after their future children.

These stories indicate that the imagined future together is based on a gendered ideology of romantic love and care. This could be because of

two reasons. First, as discussed in Chaps. 2 and 3, cross-cultural relationships are in themselves molded by an imagined and gendered stereotype of Asian women and Western men. "Traditional femininities" are perceived to be good traits in the intermarriage markets. Western men who pursue relationships with Thai women do so because they think women in their countries are too independent and do not look after their family seriously enough. In contrast, they seem to perceive Thai women as caring and sincere about family relationships. Thai women themselves also foster these images about traditional women in their own minds. Moreover, stereotypes about Western men also attract Thai women. Marrying a Western man is imagined to be an opportunity to live with a responsible partner. Hence, imagining a future together is likely to reinforce existing gender ideologies. Second, showing care by doing "practical" things for each other is important in maintaining satisfying intimate relationships (Jamieson 1998). Thus, although living at a distance is likely to prevent such care, it does not mean long-distance couples can disconnect from perceived obligations of practical care. In fact, it requires a more abstract understanding of emotional support and practical care to maintain these relationships (Holmes 2010). Thus, visualized forms of a future together seem to be based on an imagining of an exchange of mutual care, which is in itself highly gendered (Duncan et al. 2003).

However, for the women, being able to imagine a future together, replete with mutual emotional and practical care, is an important key to the successful maintenance of their long-distance relationship because these imaginings are an expression of their love and commitment to each other. As Illouz (2012, 199) described, "far from being disconnected from the real, imagination entertains a close relationship with sensory or real experiences and is often a substitute for it". Thus, women's imagination is not a freewheeling mental activity, but rather, it relies on women's own experiences and the actions of their male partners. For example, Na imagined William relied on a sense of shared "presence" that is constructed in many forms of co-presence. Virtual co-presence was constructed through various communication technologies. She and William shared stories and informed each other about their everyday lives through instant messages during the day and video chat at night. At the same time, co-presence by proxy was achieved through special objects and memory triggers. The tangibility of photos, a ring, or locations could trigger her feelings of "being closer" to William on a daily basis. The consistent, intense virtual and proxy co-presence thus could create the emotion of missing and longing

for each other. Then, these feelings could be resolved through physical co-presence. William kept visiting her at least twice a year. The physical sensation of touch tended to reassure Na that William had not changed despite the distance. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Na constantly imagined sharing her everyday life with William and being together in the future. Also, these imaginings could be associated with her efforts to enact maintenance behaviors through virtual and proxy co-presence in order to stay "connected" to William despite the discontinuity of physical co-presence.

Thus, it is possible that intimate relationships can be sustained across time and distance through the construction of "co-presence" of four types, physical, virtual, proxy, and imagined. These forms of co-presence have the potential to maintain, revitalize, and bolster long-distance relationships. However, the ability to construct co-presence does not lie only with the women, but it also stems from the actions and commitments of their male partners. The exchange of emotional support and care giving seems to help women to shift "romantic love" into "caring love", which is an important factor in ensuring that relationships can survive across distance and time.

Disappointment: Falling Out of Romantic Love

The following discussion outlines women's experiences of falling out of romantic love. It begins with the stories of three women who felt detached from their online daters at the first physical meeting. These women decided not to continue their relationships anymore after the first physical meeting, even though the men were still in Thailand. Next, the discussion focuses on the experiences of three women who felt physically and emotionally detached from their online daters after the men returned to their home countries. These women had physically met and spent an intense time with their online daters in Thailand, and they also felt that they had a deep commitment to the men.

"We Do Not Click": Falling Out from Romantic Fantasy

As discussed in the previous chapter, Oam met her online dater after they had known each other from an intermarriage dating site for only one week. The man had already planned to travel to Thailand before he met Oam on an intermarriage dating site. They made an appointment to catch up on the second day of his trip at a cafe near his hotel. After the meeting, the man texted her that he liked her company and asked to meet her again

in four days. However, Oam decided not to meet him again because she thought he may have made appointments with other women. Oam felt that if he seriously wanted to get to know her more, he would have made an appointment to see her the next day.

> I didn't want to be just one of his choices. I knew we didn't have any commitments because we just started to talk [online] and then met each other in person only one time. But I thought if he liked me and wanted to learn more about me as he told me, he would want to spend more time with me. He was here [Bangkok] for only one week, but he wanted to see me again in four days. And who knows? Maybe he would cancel to meet me if he met another girl and he liked her company more than mine. That was why I decided to not meet him again even though I liked him quite a bit. Let it end there. (Oam, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

When I asked her if she felt disappointed, she replied:

> I am not the kind of girl who would cheat or ask for money if I have a boyfriend. I said that in my profile, I am totally honest and trustworthy. I know how to take care of myself and my boyfriend. I just want to find someone who can fulfill my life. So, I was a bit hurt when I found out this man still didn't think I was good enough. (Oam, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

Oam felt a bit let down after the first meeting because she expected that the man would show that he was really interested in her by asking to meet her again the next day. However, her disappointment happened at an early stage of developing the relationship both online and offline. She had only communicated online with him for one week and had met him in person for only three hours. Thus, it seemed that it was not difficult for her to distance herself at this initial stage of the relationship even though she felt attracted to him when they first met. Eventually, Oam returned to an intermarriage dating site to search for a new online dater.

Nik and Min had a similar experience. They also met their online daters in person after they had communicated with each other only for a short time. However, in Min's case, after the first meeting, she wanted to continue the relationship but the man did not contact her again. She explained what happened:

> I wondered if I should text him or not. I liked him and waited for him to contact me again after we went out together. I thought our date went well.

We talked a lot and got along well. He told me he would stay in Thailand for two weeks and we should catch up again, but he didn't contact me again. I had no idea why he didn't. Maybe he had many girls here. (Min, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

Even though Min was interested in him, she refused to make contact, preferring to wait for him to contact her. When I asked her why she decided not to text him, she replied:

I think a post-date text should be initiated by the man. If he was attracted to me, he would do that. I didn't want to text him first. Imagine … if I texted him and he didn't reply, I would feel embarrassed for initiating something that was not returned. It would feel like I had shown my interest in him, but got nothing in return. So, for me, it was better to wait for him. (Min, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

These stories illustrate a certain pattern of romantic scripts. The cultural model of romantic relationships seems to set men up as the ones with the power to initiate and continue relationships. The kind of treatment that women receive from men then tends to determine women's decisions to continue relationships. Even though some women feel attracted to the men after the first physical meeting, they decide not to continue the relationship if they feel that the men do not display any attraction to them. Thus, the actions of the male daters are important factors in continuing intimate relationships.

"He Is Not the Same as Before": From Romantic Love to Disappointment

The previous section illustrated women's experiences of breaking up with their online daters a short time after the first physical meeting. In this section, I examine the experiences of three women: Ying, Lek, and Bee, who felt physically and emotionally detached from their online daters after they had spent an intense time together and had previously felt that they had a deep commitment to their male daters.

Ying's story, mentioned in Chap. 4, outlined how she was in an online relationship with Gavin before he first traveled to visit her in Thailand. Ying changed her relationship status on her Facebook to being in a relationship with him before they first met in person. When I met Ying in

person after we had been chatting online for six months, she told me that Gavin would visit her in Chiang Mai the following month. She felt nervous and excited to first meet him. She told me about her plans:

> I will meet him next month. He told me he will be on holiday for three weeks in February. He will stay in Bangkok for one week, and then he will come to meet me in Chiang Mai for a week. The last week, he will spend time in Phuket. I am not sure if I will travel to Phuket with him. He said it depends on me. If I want to go with him, he will pay for my trip. (Ying, face-to-face interview, January 2012)

At that time, Ying was living with her parents in the north of Thailand. She told me that she did not tell her parents about this relationship, but most of her friends knew about it because she changed her relationship status on Facebook. If the first meeting went well, she would introduce him to her parents and would travel to Phuket with him. After I met her that time, we had not chatted for a while because she was busy with preparations for the first physical meeting. I e-mailed her again in March to ask her how the first meeting went. She did not reply to my e-mail. Two weeks later, I went to her Facebook page and found that the relationship status was deleted. I was hesitant to contact her because I did not know what had really happened. Finally, I decided to leave her a Facebook message just saying hello. She replied two days later to say that the relationship was finished. She did not contact him anymore. After sending a few messages back and forth on Facebook, Ying asked me if we could talk on the phone because she wanted to talk to someone. She related her story to me:

> We had a nice time when we met each other. I was his tour guide. I took him traveling to many places in Chiang Mai. He said he was impressed because he knew I spent a lot of time to arrange everything for him. So, from that day, we were going out as boyfriend and girlfriend. I introduced him to my friends and my sister. We spent a good time together for nearly a week, until we had a big fight because I found out he met another girl in Bangkok before he came to see me. He said she was just a friend, but he didn't explain anything. I felt he did not care much how I felt after a fight, like he just ignored me. (Ying, phone interview, April 2012)

When I asked her whether she traveled to Phuket with him after she found out he met another woman in Bangkok, She replied:

After the fight, he suddenly changed. He said he wanted to spend time by himself in Phuket. I was really shocked and hurt. I said sorry to him that I didn't trust him, but you know … he cancelled my flight and traveled alone to Phuket. When he was there, I didn't hear from him as much or get any text messages straight away, but I saw him post many photos on his Facebook. I was really sad, but angry and hurt that he did that to me. I messaged him too much. He finally answered and asked me for privacy. He said he wouldn't talk to me until he finished his holiday. He wanted to relax and didn't want to think about our relationship for now. I told him I loved him and I didn't want to fight. I just wanted him to talk to me the same as before. I felt like he had so much control over me. Even though I thought it was not my fault, I said sorry to him because I didn't want him to leave me. I didn't understand how he changed his mind so definitely after I just found out he met another girl. (Ying, phone interview, April 2012)

Finally, when Gavin returned to his country, he e-mailed her that he didn't think the relationship was going to work. He was not ready for any commitment. Ying was really sad and hurt. She messaged and asked to talk to him on Skype, but she did not get any reply from him. He deleted the relationship status and blocked her on Facebook and Skype. She did not know how to contact him anymore.

The relationship between Ying and Gavin reflects the inequalities related to gender and nationality. Ying was persuaded to enter into a cross-cultural relationship by an imagining of modernity. She imagined modern Western society and harbored a desire to live in such a place. However, when she chatted with Gavin online, it was easy to feel in love with him. Gavin contacted her daily before he traveled to Thailand. The tactics that Gavin used, such as spending a lot of time with her online, messaging her frequently on the phone, and changing the relationship status in Facebook, were effective in courting Ying because it communicated to her that Gavin was interested in her for more than casual sex. As Buss (1994) suggests, these displays of love and commitment are powerful attractions to women because they signal that the man is pursuing a long-term relationship. Ying probably felt that her dream of living overseas and of romantic love were not far from being realized when Gavin gave these signals during their online courtship. Moreover, Gavin also stated to her that he planned to spend his holiday in Chiang Mai and Phuket with her, and that he was willing to pay for her when they spent time together. For Ying, the display of wealth was interpreted as proof of his special regard for her. As she said before the first physical

meeting: "He is *farang*. It is easy for him to find girls in Thailand, but he has chosen me. I am so lucky that I have met him".

Similarly, as mentioned in Chap. 4, Bee decided to hide her profile on an intermarriage dating site after Bob posted in his online dating profile that he was serious about talking to her and did not want to search for other women. The way that Bob displayed his intentions for commitment made Bee feel that he was more interested in her than in other women; he also spent a lot of time communicating with her online. Accordingly, she stopped searching and chatting with another man and spent more time communicating with him. After four months of chatting online, Bee felt that she had fallen in love with him. Then, when they finally met each other in person, Bee decided to be in a relationship with him and introduced him to her friends and family. In Bee's case, there were no problems during the first meeting. The relationship developed. They started to talk about a future together. However, a month after Bob returned to his country, he gradually distanced himself from her. Bee was confused about what really happened in the relationship and tried to "work him out", whereas Bob was reluctant to respond her. He always tried to avoid the conversation:

> He always said that he was too tired to talk because he was busy at work. I was confused about what went wrong and tried to find out. I could only contact him via online and phone. If he didn't reply to me, I couldn't do anything. I asked him many times if he could tell me what went wrong because I couldn't get him out of my head and I felt so hurt. Finally, he replied to me that … "please don't get me wrong. I do love you, but I don't want to waste time with a distance relationship. It won't work". You know … he also said he only realized and made this decision when he returned from his trip. He told me that he was thinking about whether he should carry on and see if things would work out. But he thought that it wouldn't be fair on me. I was shocked and replied to him to ask for a second chance. But I didn't get any reply from him. I didn't hear from him again. Even now, I still don't understand what really happened. Was it just distance or he was just not into me and he just played me? (Bee, face-to-face interview, April 2012)

As Langford (1999, 67) argues, when love relationships become more established, a disjuncture seemingly exists between women's hopes of living "happily ever after" and their experiences. The inherent instability of the whole situation becomes more apparent when women pay more attention

to the way their online partners respond to them. In the case of women who felt emotionally and physically apart from their online partners, they felt that the men did not display or show their love and commitment the same as before. The women found that they did not sense a companionate love to be present because their online partners were unwilling to engage in mutual disclosure. For example, Bee felt that Bob did not keep chatting to her the same way after he returned to his own country. Ying felt that Gavin suddenly changed after she found out he met another girl in Bangkok. When the change occurred, the women were generally at a loss to understand it and tried to find out what went wrong with their relationships. The more complete the man's silence, the more effort the women might expend in carrying out what has been termed the "emotion work" within the relationship (Langford 1999). Finally, in the case of Ying and Bee, after the men had completely ignored them, they attempted to deal with the contradiction between their imagination of lasting love and their disappointment in reality; this was done by reaffirming to themselves that their online partners were not different from the stereotype of Western men who searched for "holiday girlfriends". Displays of love and long-term commitment showed by the men during their online courtship were redefined as being fake and insincere. The women considered themselves to be unlucky in love and decided that these men were not their *Nua Koo*.

In conclusion, the stories of women in this book seem to highlight the fact that although women may find distance difficult in terms of being together with their loved ones, being apart does not necessarily mean loneliness or despair if the women can shift from romantic love into caring love. Demonstrations of emotional and practical care and imagining a future together become a significant factor in maintaining these relationships across distance. This ability is doubtless based on the construction of co-presence, which is not only produced by the women but is also as a result of certain commitments and actions from their male partners. In contrast, when co-presence is absence, a sense of disappointment predominates and pervades women's everyday lives. Thus, it is difficult for women to shift romantic love into caring love, and eventually they are likely to fall out of romantic love because they cannot imagine the romantic fantasy of lasting togetherness.

The stories of the women illustrate that, even though Western men have more power in developing and maintaining cross-cultural relationships across distance, women also construct and reconstruct their relationships depending on their imagination and the circumstances of their

relationships. That is, if the romantic side in their relationships still dominates over gender and national inequalities, women seem to subordinate themselves to love. Perhaps, this is because women have the power to fantasize and imagine the future of their relationship. Thus, rather than assuming that power is something that Western man have and Thai women do not, power should be understood in terms of a complex strategic situation (Foucault 1990). Imagination is one form of power with which women operate and with which they constitute their own lives.

NOTES

1. The Civic Integration Examination Abroad is an exam for foreigners who want to stay in the Netherlands for more than three months. This exam is an assessment of basic knowledge of Dutch language and society. See more details in Immigration and Naturalisation Service (2013).
2. The K-1 visa permits the foreign-citizen fiancé(e) to travel to the USA and marry his or her US citizen sponsor within 90 days of arrival. See more details in U.S. Department of State (2014).

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Conclusion: Love and Intimacy in Online Cross-Cultural Relationships

Internet relationships, especially those involving Thai women and Western men, are typically assumed to threaten the values of "love" for two important reasons. First, when women from developing countries seek cross-cultural relationships with men from developed countries, it is generally assumed that economic deprivation and financial opportunism are their primary motivations. That is, that these relationships are economic, as opposed to romantic, exchanges. Second, when the relationships are Internet-based, they are commonly presumed to be fallacious and fraught with danger because of the anonymity of online interactions. The reality that is ignored in such accounts is the role of a desire for love and intimacy. One must question whether the presence of economic and social gain in cross-cultural relationships, together with the anonymity of online interactions, act to deny the fact that women are seeking and developing "love" and "intimacy" in online contexts.

This book has examined women's journeys—both online and offline— in the formation, development, and maintenance of love and intimacy across national and cultural boundaries. It has drawn upon the narratives of 24 Thai women who turned to intermarriage dating sites to pursue cross-cultural relationships online with Western men. These women had experienced at least one physical meeting with their online Western partner in Thailand. The book was divided into three parts. The first part considered the reasons why Thai women turn to intermarriage dating sites to pursue cross-cultural relationships online and why intermarriage dating sites appear to be displacing other ways of meeting foreign partners in

Thailand. It demonstrated how searching for alternative avenues to migration and/or seeking economic security does not constitute women's chief motivations. Whether divorced or never married, these women turned to intermarriage dating sites to search for a profound commitment with someone who truly would engage them, both on a mental and an emotional level. Such women do not choose to pursue online dating per se, but rather they choose to seek relationships with Western men. However, the absence of opportunities to meet and interact with Western men in Thailand prompts them to then turn to intermarriage dating sites.

The second part of the book explored the website representations, and the self-representations, of women on intermarriage dating sites. The discussion showed that when women enter the field of intermarriage dating sites, they confront specific rules and norms for that particular social space. Thus, although these women always asserted that they sought love and intimacy first and foremost, they nevertheless had to engage with the ambiguities and contradictions arising from the normative and practical tensions between love and the market environment. In their engagement with this form of advertising, women seemed to highlight the preferred features extant in intermarriage markets so as to maximize their chances of being selected by Western men. Thus, the ways in which women represented themselves continue to reflect existing positive and negative stereotypes of Thai women in the intermarriage marketplace.

The third part highlighted how love and intimacy are initiated and developed from an online to an offline context, and, following this, how cross-cultural relationships can be maintained across distance and time. The discussion demonstrated how cyberspace is linked to the intimate experiences of everyday life. Among those women and men who seek their prospective spouses from other countries, the Internet is employed to establish, develop, sustain and/or break up relationships across distance (Constable 2007; Saroca 2012). In the initial stage of relationships, the intensity of online interactions was shown to facilitate mutual self-disclosure and allow for expressions of love and intimacy. The women generally looked to the relationships for a sense of being "special" where men openly demonstrated a liking and admiration for them, and enjoyed spending time communicating online with them. These actions rapidly encouraged intimacy and facilitated higher hopes for the creation of a relationship. Yet, moving the relationship from cyberspace to the physical world represents a critical juncture in the lead-up to long-term relationships. The first encounter offline takes cross-cultural relationships to a deeper level of

intimacy and commitment when online daters actually feel the sensation of physical co-presence and spend intense time together. Thus, after the first physical meeting, a shift occurs in the emotional dynamics of these relationships. Women felt that the Internet could not substitute for the physical co-presence of their online daters. Their narratives about long-distance relationships often reflected the difficulties associated with separation and the resultant loneliness. Nevertheless, the women tended to frame their long-distance relationships within a discourse of love and commitment. They selected and rejected various features of love, redefining the distance as proof of their love thereby sustaining their relationships.

In this concluding chapter, I revisit some of the themes explored above, drawing them together to produce new findings on the subject of love and intimacy in cross-cultural and online contexts. I examine how the role of desire for love and intimacy is related to cross-cultural relationships and online interactions. I begin by discussing whether the ways in which love and intimacy are initiated and developed on the Internet mark a radical departure from the cultural model of romantic love. The discussion then considers how love and intimacy operate in cross-cultural relationships. It emphasizes both the work of women's imagination and the ways in which women exert active agency within gender and national inequalities. Finally, the chapter closes with suggestions for further research in online cross-cultural relationships.

Narratives of Romantic Love in Online Contexts

This book investigated how women interpret and reinterpret the narratives of romantic love when they turn to cyberspace to pursue cross-cultural relationships. As argued throughout the book, rather than being independent of romantic love in the offline world, the dynamics of love and intimacy in online contexts share some commonalities with those that are pursued offline. Although they do differ in terms of the initial mode of meeting and the ways of enacting love and intimacy, there are numerous similarities in the rules and rituals of constructing, developing, and maintaining relationships; these include the expression of romance, the building of trust and intimacy, and the determination of compatibility and chemistry.

As noted in Chaps. 2 and 3, women's desires for love and intimacy encourage them to position themselves in settings where they can be seen by, and can meet, Western men. They turn to intermarriage dating sites

and create online profiles with the hope of finding the right man who might be interested in them. Such sites offer them a "search" feature in the main menu, which include categories like country, marital status, education, age, religion, income, physical appearance, and even the inclination toward having children. Thus, women can search some characteristics of key importance to them. These search criteria rely on women's personal experiences, expectations, and life histories. Consequently, in the first stage of searching for and selecting their male partners, women's search for love appears to be a less spontaneous and more carefully reasoned process.

However, when women find an attractive man, the regular, frequent, and intense contact between them through online communication tools consolidates this online intimate relationship and ties it more closely to one particular man. Once women feel that they have fallen in love, they do not privilege the more "practical" elements in their narratives of love. Rather, these women seem to emphasize the presence of transcendent emotions, presumably in order to support and authenticate their claims of experiencing "true" romantic love (Lindholm 1995). The narratives of romantic love express a sudden realization of love, which confirms the salience of "the popular image of Cupid blindly striking people with the arbitrary arrows of love" (Illouz 1997, 108). Women stress that their online relationships are an unexpected epiphany. They have no expectations of falling in love with their online partners despite intentionally turning to intermarriage dating sites to seek a Western lover. For example, Na claimed that she was bored with her everyday life and so used a dating site without any expectations, and then she found her husband. Pla always hid her profile, but her husband accidentally found her when she was online for just a short time. These situations illustrate the ideology of spontaneity, an important characteristic of normative romantic love.

Interestingly, when discussions shift from narratives of "searching for love" on online intermarriage markets to narratives of "falling in love" with someone in cyberspace, there is a parallel tendency for a descriptive change to occur. The narrative moves from a concern with the more pragmatic and rational aspects of the potential relationship to that of its transcendent and apparently irrational character. The concept of *Nua Koo* is used here to make sense of the apparent randomness of their meeting. The fact that they met and fell in love with someone from an intermarriage dating site is understood to be the result of "karma" from a previous life, which is irresistible and uncontrollable.

Moreover, women's narratives of romantic love also resonate with the "difficult journey" of romantic love in cross-cultural relationships. Women tend to frame long-distance relationships in terms of the difficulty of separation and the loneliness and frustration of online communication. At the same time, women also express a sense of promise as online couples imagine their future together. Thus, rather than perceiving online cross-cultural relationships as problematic, the women negotiate distance and physical separation by interpreting these challenges as "proof" of their love as they are willing to endure the pain of separation to realize their destiny and achieve true romantic love. Finally, living together represents the ultimate reward for discovering their *Nua Koo.*

In contrast to Illouz (2007, 2012), who argues that the use of the Internet for meeting and dating marks a radical departure from the culture of love and romanticism, the women in my study demonstrate that they are still subject to the influence of notions of romantic love. This could be because their relationships are not only online relationships but are also long-distance, cross-cultural relationships. It is usually not as easy to meet in person as it is with local online dating as Illouz has explored. The extended periods of time spent chatting with, and learning about, each other online may well predispose them to transform the Internet encounter into a narrative of romantic love. Therefore, even though Internet dating is linked to "the principle of mass consumption based on an economy of abundance, endless choice, efficiently, rationalization, selective targeting, and standardization" (Illouz 2007, 90), the notion of a beloved individual's uniqueness can easily be constructed on the Internet. The women in this study tended to stop searching by hiding or switching off their profiles on the intermarriage dating sites when they found an attractive man who was interested in them. They then changed to communicating offsite, rescheduling and rearranging their lives to maximize their availability for their new man. Further, they were willing to disregard some characteristics of their online daters that did not match their prior expectations; in other words, they chose to attend the whole, rather than to its parts. The ways in which their online daters' various attributes were integrated to become holistic occurred in the process of the development of love and intimacy online prior to any physical encounter.

Therefore, even though Internet imagination/love is not based on embodied attributes, I argue that this does not mean that the Internet cannot provide a form of knowledge, which is derived about a specific individual. In fact, the intensity of online communication facilitates mutual

self-disclosure and in turn, can create a feeling of heightened connectivity and intimacy between online couples. It forces online couples to get to know each other without the distraction of physical or sexual attraction thereby fulfilling the requirement of a cultural model of love as a source of emotional pleasure rather than of sensual satisfaction (Wilding 2003). By revealing themselves through the process of self-disclosure, women insist that their feeling toward their online partners is markedly different from any sentiments toward others.

On the one hand, the ways in which online relationships function along similar lines to normative romantic love can itself reassure women that their relationships have as much chance at success as relationships that result from conventional face-to-face romance. On the other hand, romantic love encourages the fantasy of lifelong commitment which is likely to reinforce existing gender ideologies of love and care. While women continue to be influenced by the ideal of romantic love, the reality is that they cannot escape from gender inequality in relationships. Therefore, one must ask the question that if women are willing, and choose to participate in such relationships, does it still constitute oppression? In the next section, this discussion moves to the issue of love and inequality in cross-cultural relationships. Are men and women in cross-cultural relationships equally susceptible to the emotions of love and intimacy? What preconditions are necessary for women to be able to develop and maintain love and intimacy across time and distance? Does new technology reproduce old gendered models of relationships?

GENDER, LOVE, AND POWER IN CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

As I have argued throughout the book, cross-cultural relationships cannot be understood without considering the role and impact of gender and sexuality. It is clear that the stories told and created, by and for women, are influenced by gender scripts. Women's experiences in this study reflect highly gendered social roles within their cross-cultural relationships. The persistence of gendered lenses in self-representations, in expectations within relationships, and in the imagining of care and a shared future is a reminder that gender issues continue to exist at the core of love and intimacy in cross-cultural relationships. As noted in Chaps. 2 and 3, cross-cultural relationships are in themselves molded by imagined, gendered stereotypes of both Asian women and Western men. "Traditional Thai women" and "responsible *farang* men" are perceived to be of worthy

character traits in participants in the intermarriage markets where different motives, logic, and desires come into play. That is, while Western men search for Thai women whom they imagine to be more committed to family values and less demanding than Western women, Thai women expect Western men to be more responsible than Thai men.

Hence, the process of courtship correspondence between Thai women and Western men continues to be based on an ideology of traditional gender roles. A "good woman" in such relationships generally means a high-quality care giver, a devoted lover, and a supportive partner, whereas a "good man" indicates a responsible and reliable leader, a romantic lover, and a faithful partner. These dynamics mean that when cross-cultural couples interact and communicate both online and offline, enacting gender is unavoidable because it establishes individuals' perceived status as a "good lover/partner". Although such relationships occur across physical distance, this does not mean that couples are disconnected from the performance of gender roles. In fact, a more abstract understanding of emotional support and practical care is necessary. For example, as noted in Chap. 6, when Na imagined her future with William, she committed herself to the ideal of "a good, caring wife" to prove her love and affection to William. Similarly, Fah expected to migrate to live with Joe in the Netherlands and perhaps stay at home and look after their future children, whereas Joe's role in the future was to be the "breadwinner" for the family.

Thus, far from intimacy being transformed, as Giddens (1992) has suggested, in cross-cultural relationships, love and intimacy remain clearly based on established patterns of caring, social power, and gender roles (see also Evans 2003; Jamieson 1998, 1999). The model of heterosexual relationships in late modernity, where love and intimacy are assumed to have become "democratized", may come about when personal relationships are no longer limited by external constraints and when women and men are treated equally. However, in cross-cultural relationships, love and intimacy are constructed within a discourse of "traditional gender roles", which couples adopt as a means to recapture the past. Men still enjoy seeing their lovers uphold the values of so-called traditional relationships; they are desirous of a woman who tends to them and provides them with excellent care. The women themselves, too, seem to place a high value on traditional notions of being care-givers and housewives.

Moreover, when women consider themselves to be in an intimate relationship, they do not easily end it, despite encountering the difficulty of separation and the loneliness and frustration of long-distance

communication. This demonstrates that love and intimacy in online cross-cultural relationships continue to be linked to a desire for and expectation of a lifelong commitment. The need to be loved not only motivates women to initiate relationships with Western men on intermarriage dating sites but also encourages them to develop and maintain these relationships across distance and time. Women's aspirations to live "happily ever after" challenge the notion of intimacy in Giddens' pure relationships, in which confluent love has emerged to fulfill women's need for intimacy, lasting only as long as they find it rewarding. Indeed, love and intimacy in online cross-cultural relationships seem to recapture the notion of "romantic love", which Giddens (1992, 42–46) noted as emergent in the late eighteenth century. He argued that idealized notions of gender and lifelong commitment in personal relationships were central to this view of romantic love. For couples in the past, personal relationships and marriage could be sustained by a division of labor between the sexes, with the domain of the man being that of paid work and the woman, that of home. Moreover, romantic love entailed a long-term life trajectory and created a shared history between couples that gave personal relationships a special primacy.

This study demonstrates that, rather than transforming to "confluent love", cross-cultural relationships both online and offline reflect a highly gendered dynamic based upon the ideal of romantic love. Doing gender according to romantic scripts is evident in the dynamics of such relationships. For example, Chan was reluctant to instigate travel to meet John in person for the first time in his own country because she felt that the first physical meeting should be organized by the man, thus proving himself to be serious about the relationship. Likewise, Min refused to make contact even though she was attracted to her online dater after their first physical meeting. She decided to wait for him to contact her because she believed that the man should initiate any follow-up contact or display of attraction. Karn similarly expressed the view that sex was of little importance to a woman. She did not seek it, but she participated because she thought Ralph desired it. Women's experiences show that although women hope for love and intimacy, they still encounter and reproduce a specific pattern of romantic scripts in which men exercise greater power in determining the dynamics of the relationship and men make decisions on behalf of both partners (Pennington 2009).

Furthermore, the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships are also shaped by inequalities between rich and poor nations. Traveling to meet each other represents an important manifestation of the inequalities

imposed on cross-cultural couples on the basis of their nationality. Visa restrictions directly relate to nation-states' attempts to control the movement of certain groups of people, imposing visa restrictions on passport holders from specific nations from which large-scale illegal immigration is feared (Neumayer 2006). For online cross-cultural couples, the length of time from meeting and developing a close relationship online to having an actual physical encounter is not considered part of the relationship duration requirement period for visas. Thus, if women want to apply for a visa to first visit their online partners, they are not eligible to apply for a partner (temporary) visa because they have never actually met in person. The women can only apply for a visitor or tourist visa. Even so, as discussed in Chap. 5, when these women apply for a visitor or tourist visa to travel to Western countries, some applications may be denied because the women cannot provide the requisite formal documentation, especially evidence of their employment, and financial and economic commitments in Thailand. Lack of adequate evidence proving that the women have sufficient funds for travel, as well as the intention to return to their own countries, promotes the belief in relevant immigration bureaus that women are going to immigrate permanently rather than temporarily. This underlines a sense of immobility, which is built into the assumption that women who seek relationships outside their own ethnic/national group are abnormal or have ulterior motives, particularly with regard to escaping poverty.

Yet, such visa restrictions reflect the highly unequal access to foreign spaces, which in turn, reinforces the existing gender and national inequalities inherent in cross-cultural relationships. The right to move or travel across national borders is unequally distributed across Thai women and Western men. While Western countries strictly control Thai women's entry requirements, the Thai nation-state tends to refrain from imposing visa restrictions on passport holders from privileged nations, particularly Western countries. As noted in Chaps. 3 and 5, most policymakers subscribe to the view that Westerners (both tourists and foreign husbands) are desirable, primarily for economic reasons. The immigration process for Western men to obtain a visa to enter Thailand is much easier. In fact, passport holders from many Western countries can enter Thailand without any visa and can stay for a period not exceeding 30 days on each visit. In this sense, Western men more closely represent the ideal of a global citizen who has the right to migrate for leisure purposes (Urry 2000). They can easily initiate or change travel plans to visit a woman when they have the time and funds to support their trip.

Thus, not only do gendered forms of romantic scripts influence the dynamic of cross-cultural relationships, but immigration laws and global inequalities between rich and poor countries also reinforce the power imbalance between these men and women. Western men have more choice regarding how, when, and where the relationship develops. However, this does not imply that gender and national inequalities are expressed unambiguously. In fact, women's experiences in cross-cultural relationships that might be interpreted as expressions of gender and national inequalities are not defined as oppressed or dominated, but rather they are understood to be gender and cultural differences. Women who are in relationships with Western men allow themselves to be influenced by powerful ideals of gendered and romantic love. They believe that their relationships are based on differences between Western males and Thai females, which are mutually complementary. What I want to emphasize here is that, despite this, at certain points in the process of cross-cultural relationships, women do exert agency in deciding how and when their relationships are to be constructed and reconstructed over time and changing situations.

Even though women turn to intermarriage dating sites imagining a modern and romantic *farang* man, women's imagination is an emancipatory process that can change over time in response to new experiences and situations (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). The notion of a *farang* man can be reconstructed when the relationship develops or changes in terms of new stages or circumstances. For example, Jin originally turned to intermarriage dating sites to search for Western men. However, she decided to commit to a relationship with Sanj, a British Indian man, whom she reconstructed as an Indian educated in England, or in other words, a *farang*. This reflects that the "right *farang* man" meant something different to each woman. Women have the ability to imagine various options and choose from among them. They exert their agency to decide who to fall in love with and when.

There is also women's agency at play in romantic imagination. Such agency is clearly visible when the women talk about how they differentiate the man they fall in love with from another and how they reserved their feelings exclusively for him. Women draw on the discourse of *Nua Koo* to show that they actively articulated a coherent and socially approved story of their love. This is part of their deliberate attempt to normalize their online relationships and make sense of the randomness of their online meeting. Also, *Nua Koo* discourse emphasizes the romantic side of the relationship that takes precedence over gender and national inequalities.

It encourages women to project their future with the man and subordinate themselves to powerful, romantic love. Thus, women's imagining of enduring togetherness becomes fuel for women's actions in sustaining the relationship across distance and time.

Furthermore, while romantic love encourages the fantasy of lifelong commitments, the new technology of the Internet also creates a sense of togetherness when physical co-presence is absent or non-existent. For example, the ability to see each other and share everyday lives via video chat demonstrates how couples stretched by distance can engage in each other's everyday lives. Video chat represents a unique place for the creation of virtual co-presence because of its ability to transmit a "sense of sight" that closely approximates face-to-face interaction (Fagersten 2010). Communication technologies seemingly diminish the limitations of distance and make long-distance couples feel closer to each other. Thus, based on frequent and intense online communications, women can imagine themselves doing their normal routine with their partners when being apart. The Internet enables imaginary co-presence and allows women to create more abstractly imagined forms of love and emotional care to underwrite the future together.

However, this does not mean that new technology is reproducing traditional gendered models of relationships, even though imaginary co-presence seems to be based on a gendered ideology of romantic love and care. In fact, as I have argued throughout the book, cross-cultural relationships are in themselves molded by imagined and gendered perceptions of the desirability of Asian women and Western men. Thus, it is impossible to overlook the persistence of gendered lenses in the processes of such relationships. More than any other types of relationships, cross-cultural relationships encourage women to imagine their future lives with a modern, romantic, and responsible man. At the same time, a romantic side in the relationship enables women to imagine the fantasy of enduring togetherness which is based on gender ideologies. Thus, in the absence of regular opportunities to meet in person, the technology of the Internet offers new ways of managing the relationship between presence and absence and sustaining women's imagination over time and space.

Thus, rather than assuming that power is something that Western man have and Thai women do not, this book shows that power should be understood in terms of a complex strategic situation (Foucault 1990). Imagination is one form of power that women operate to manage their own lives. Women's imagination is the capacity to invent something that

was not there before. It leans and relies on sensations, feelings, and emotions to make present that which is absent (Illouz 2009). Thus, in order to initiate, develop, and sustain relationships at a distance, women's imagination is a necessary resource and a driver behind possible change in cross-cultural relationships.

The "Ongoingness" of Cross-cultural Relationships

During my fieldwork, some cross-cultural relationships quickly progressed from the first stage of searching to a deeper level of intimacy and formal commitment, such as marriage, while other relationships moved from the stage of romantic love to one of disappointment. For example, when Ping and Ying were first interviewed, Ping was in the stage of developing her online relationship with Glenn, while Ying was seeking her online daters in an intermarriage dating site. At the time of collecting data, they had developed their relationships from online to the first physical meeting. However, at the final interview in May 2012, Ping had married Glenn and was enjoying the honeymoon phase, while Ying had distanced herself from Gavin after they met and spent time together. She was in the stage of recovery and was deciding whether she would return to intermarriage dating sites.

As Duck (1994, xii) argued, relationships happen in a context of "ongoingness", which is "built on a real past and an extended future that each exert an influence on the meaning of relational behavior in the present". Thus, to help us understand cross-cultural relationships that are pursued in cyberspace, we need additional systematic data that follows up on online couples' life stories. Such a study would complement the women's stories in this book, which themselves make some contribution to an understanding of the ongoing processes embodied in cross-cultural relationships. Essentially, this book fills a gap in the knowledge about cross-cultural relationships and cyberspace by exploring the different opening stages of these relationships: it examines the initial stages of meeting someone on intermarriage dating sites and moves through the different stages that comprise a courtship by correspondence. In this way, the book offers some insight into the dynamics of online cross-cultural relationships, how they are initiated, developed, maintained, or terminated.

However, as noted in Chap. 1, this book concludes at the point where online cross-cultural couples move across some distance to live together.

I do not seek to extend this research to follow these women's lives after completing my fieldwork in May 2012 despite being able to see their ongoing relationships through my online social networks. For example, Ping gave birth to her first daughter in January 2013 and began to think about migrating to live with her partner, Glenn. Oam and Ying returned to intermarriage dating sites and began searching for and then getting to know their new online daters. Karn moved back to Thailand in July 2014 to care for her elderly mother and has been in a long-distance relationship. Pla traveled to first visit her husband and his family in Germany in April 2013. Tay married Tim in December 2014, while Jin continued an on and off relationship with Sanj.

Finally, this book has raised some areas for further studies. As touched on above, one of these would be to pursue these women's experiences after they changed from being long-distance couples to being geographically proximate couples. This study highlights how cross-cultural relationships, both in online and offline contexts, are based on normative romantic love, which reinforces existing gender ideologies. Living at a distance does not mean couples can disconnect from the perceived obligations of emotional and practical care. In fact, it requires more abstractly imagined forms of a future together that adhere to the traditional values of performing caring work. Hence, it would be interesting to explore whether this imagining remains after cross-cultural couples start to live together. What is necessary for cross-cultural couples to sustain love and intimacy at the new stage of the relationship? Furthermore, the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships in this study rely solely on women's experiences as opposed to men's experiences. Thus, it would be fascinating to conduct complementary research that focuses on the perspectives of Western men, which would add even further depth to an understanding of these processes.

In sum, this book contributes to a new framework of understanding cross-cultural relationships both online and offline. It clearly illustrates women's expressions of love and intimacy in the formation, development, and maintenance of relationships across distance and time. The book captures the ways in which women respond to the social and cultural changes that occur as a consequence of technological innovations. It provides evidence that the intensity of online communication can facilitate mutual self-disclosure and can create a feeling of heightened connectivity and intimacy between couples. This is important not only for researchers interested in the study of love and intimacy, but also for those studying other aspects of personal relationships and new global technologies.

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