

DENATURALIZING POLYGYNY IN BANGKOK, THAILAND¹

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Polygyny is practiced throughout Thai society and often attributed to a “man’s nature.” This study reveals that polygyny is informed by the political economy and identity politics. By analyzing polygynous practices among second generation Chinese Thai family businesses, polygyny can be understood as an economic enterprise, a sexual relationship, and an affair of the heart. The naturalization of Thai men’s sexual privilege not only conceals power relationships but also compels men and women to perceive conjugal problems as personal instead of expressions of larger social issues. Notions of family business, masculinity and femininity, and money and sex are intricately intertwined with polygynous relationships. (Polygyny, family business, masculine and feminine identity, Chinese Thai)

Polygyny is present in all social strata of Thai society. Journalists report its practice by prime ministers, members of parliament, businessmen, and even taxi drivers (Fletcher and Gearing 1997; Sanitsuda 2003). Nevertheless, no in-depth study of polygyny in Thailand has been done, except for a seven-year survey conducted at Ramathibodi Hospital in Bangkok. That survey found that as many as one in four Thai men, especially businessmen between the ages of 30 and 50, had a *mia noi* (minor wife) (*Bangkok Post*, Feb. 5, 2001).² Some questions, however, remain unanswered. How does family life, or reproduction, intertwine with the family business, or production, in the context of polygyny? How do these polygynous men and women negotiate their conjugal relationships from the bedroom to the work place? How does ethnicity play a role, especially since a large proportion of polygynous businessmen in Bangkok are ethnic Chinese? How are masculine and feminine identities understood in the context of polygyny?

This essay explores these issues by focusing on *lukchin* businessmen and women to illustrate the political economy of polygyny, which has been obscured by the discourse on “men’s nature” in Thai society. Polygynous men and women work together to advance their common interests, each needing to do emotional work and negotiate with one another. A polygynous *lukchin* man must compromise between business, family, and personal interests, precisely because he is in part motivated to seek plural wives to expand the family business. Polygyny can be an economic enterprise, a sexual relationship, and an affair of the heart.

Lukchin are the children of immigrants from rural southern China who came to Thailand before 1949. Ethnic Chinese are about 14 percent, or 9.1 million, of Thailand’s total population of 65 million.³ Many *lukchin* were born and raised in Bangkok, a city with a large ethnic Chinese population. *Lukchin* upward social mobility is closely related to commercial production in Thailand (Mackie 1992:163).

Both ethnic Thai and Chinese have taken commercial orientation and business success as major criteria of being Chinese (Boonsanong 1971:66; Szanton Blanc 1983:109). Therefore, “Chinese-ness” (*khuam pen chin*) is both an ethnic category and a middle-class category, regardless of whether someone is middle class or not.

Anthropologists’ interests in marriage and family in Southeast Asia have centered on kinship systems, marriage rules, fertility, and family size (e.g., Apichat 1986; Cushman 1991; Djamour 1965; Freedman 1957, 1979; Geertz 1961; Kuo and Wong 1979; McCoy 1993; Potter 1977; Topley 1955). Years ago, Spiro (1977:212) pointed out that some anthropologists studied every aspect of marriage but sex. He (1977) discussed Burmese sex and taboos, and made the connection between Burmese sexual behavior and cultural norms (Spiro 1977:2,102,111). Still, he took some of these norms, such as “sex drive,” for granted, a notion that falls into what Vance (1991) calls the “cultural influence model,” a category characterized by anthropological writing on sexuality from about 1920 to 1990. She says, “this model of sexuality is seen as the basic material—a kind of universal Play-Doh—on which culture works, a naturalized category which remains closed to investigation and analysis” (Vance 1991:878).

Conjugal sex, perhaps because it has been viewed as “normal,” tends to be naturalized in studies of sexuality in Thailand. Through the 1970s and 1980s, studies of sexuality primarily concentrated on issues of population growth, fertility, post-nuptial residence, and female sex workers (e.g., Apichat 1984; Bhassorn 1987, 1994; Cherlin and Apichat 1988; Knodel and Peerasit 1988; Pasuk 1981). More recently, scholars have ventured beyond the study of commercial sexual relations and high-risk groups to explore the representation of sexualities, married men’s sexuality, and gay identities (e.g., Cohen 2003; Hamilton 1997; Jackson and Cook 1999; Lyttleton 1994; Manderson 1992, 1995; Manderson and Pranee 2002; Taylor 2005). These studies of sex workers, male premarital and extramarital sexual behavior, sexual practices, and gender politics in Thai society contrast with the silence regarding conjugal sexuality.

This article focuses on polygynous conjugal sexuality and its relation to family business, the most common form of business organization among ethnic Chinese in Thailand. The family enterprise integrates home and work space into a single unit, crossing the boundary between production and reproduction. In this space, family/business, husband/wives, boss/employees, and money/sex are conflated into an inseparable nexus. Situating polygyny in the context of the family business enables unpacking the prevailing notion of “men’s nature” in Thai society.

Men and women, both ethnic Thai and Chinese, talk about a man’s biological need for a lot of sex (Van Landingham et al. 1993:298–99), or more than one wife, and consider it as part of a man’s nature (*pen thamachat khong phucha*) or the result of having inherited bad blood (*sailuet mai di*). Many accept these ideas and sexual practices are god-given truths. Naturalization, as Yanagisako and Delaney (1995:1) point out, contains power “already embedded in culture.” Overlapping socio-economic forces and gender inequalities are disguised by conventional beliefs and

habitual practices. Naturalization occurs within political and economic forces, not outside of them. But naturalization is not total. If it is natural for men to pursue sex at every opportunity, then why do some and not all? Men and women, to varying degrees, are aware that conjugal sex, especially within polygyny, directly affects the family economy, the children's inheritance, the wife's reputation, and her emotions.

To capture everyday negotiations between husband and wives, three families are the ethnographic focus of this essay.⁴ Each is different, each reveals how diverse and rich polygyny can be, and all illustrate how family members navigate lives of ambiguity and contradictions.

A wife is the most desirable laborer in a family business, not only because her labor is cheap (Greenhalgh 1994; Hsiung 1996), but because it is so reliable. She is structurally bound to the family business by her interests, her obligations to the family, and her sexual commitment to her husband. Furthermore, a polygynist's masculine identity is tied to his wives' bodies and labor; and sex is one of the factors on which all of this hinges. The integration of two seemingly separate units—polygyny and the family business—amplifies turmoil and conflict and forces each party to manage one's heart to keep the family and the business functioning well. The ways in which polygynists cross the boundaries between the presumed binary opposition between production and reproduction enables seeing polygynous conjugal sexuality at the intersection and understanding the ways in which naturalized men's sexual privilege obscures the contingent ways in which masculine and feminine identities are negotiated and acted upon.

GENDERED RIGHTS AND THE LAW

In the 1920s, a few Western-educated nobles suggested that polygyny be abolished in the Kingdom of Siam (Thailand before 1939) so that Westerners would stop perceiving Siam as a backward or uncivilized nation (Barme 2002:160). The proposal encountered strong resistance from King Rama VI, who favored maintaining this "deep-rooted" convention, and by others who justified the need to increase the Thai population in order to cope with the growing numbers of Chinese immigrants and their rising economic power (Barme 2002:160, 161, 168). In 1935, legal polygyny was abolished in Thailand, not as an attempt to achieve gender equality but in an effort to improve Thailand's image internationally.

Banning polygyny changed only the letter of the law. In 2003, Thai Rak Thai, Thailand's ruling party at the time, triggered a storm of controversy by considering "screen[ing] candidates so that only faithful and monogamous husbands can stand in elections" (*BBC News*, Dec. 2, 2003). Many members of parliament openly opposed the proposal, and one remarked that if faithfulness was a requirement, "the party would only be able to field around 30 candidates, compared to its more than 200 sitting MPs [members of parliament]" (*BBC News*, Dec. 2, 2003; *The Nation*, Dec. 12, 2003). One member of parliament even argued that "it is the right of any man to have mistresses or visit massage parlors" (*Agence France Press*, Dec. 2,

2003). This “right” does not apply to Thai women. Sanoh Thienthong, Minister of the Interior and in charge of Family Law, had himself taken a former Miss Thailand as a minor wife, and the Permanent Secretary of the Interior admitted having four wives (Sanitsuda 1997).

There are points where family law and custom are incompatible. The Family Registration Act of 1935 states that only registered marriages are legal. However, customary or ceremonial marriages are accepted by most people. The wedding ceremony, for many, is more important than the act of registration. In 1987, for example, only 55 percent of marriages by women between the ages of 15 and 49 had been registered (Napaporn 1989:205–06). In some years fewer than half of newly married couples registered their marriages (Juree 1994:524). Non-government employees do not receive a pension or assistance from the state for their children as do government employees; others circumvent marriage registration to avoid taxes or to retain greater freedom in the management of property or a family business (Napaporn 2003:6). This disparity between customary marriage and marriage registration creates space for polygynists to manipulate the system. Some men have customary marriages with one wife and a legal marriage with another; and some have customary marriages with several women. Against such a background, Thais usually call the first wife the major wife (*mia luang*) and the second one the minor wife (*mia noi*) regardless of the marriage’s legality. For this article and in Thai society, polygyny is defined by practice.

The current sex ratio among Thais at birth is 1.05 males to every female, and for ages 15 to 64, 0.98 males to every female.⁵ Clearly, Thai polygyny is not the result of an imbalanced sex ratio. Although many Thai men become celibate monks, many Thai women marry foreign men and emigrate. Not one polygynous woman or unmarried woman in all of my research attributed her decision to marry a polygynist or to remain unmarried to the availability of men.

NORMATIVE GENDER EXPECTATIONS

Rites of passage and the repetition of convention are important in naturalizing and normalizing male authority and privilege in Thai society. From childhood, men are encouraged to become and temporarily serve as monks. Completing this customary term as a monk is believed to transform a “raw man” into a mature man and a complete person (*pen khunsombun*) (Keyes 1987:36). In contrast, for a woman, marriage symbolizes being a complete person (Anuman 1973:57–58). Marriage and the monastery are the most influential institutions for which men and women are socialized and disciplined.

Being male and having religious experience legitimize a man’s position of leadership. This extends across the family and the public realms. The exclusively male spiritual rite of becoming a celibate monk parallels another male rite in which an older man takes a younger man to a brothel for his first sexual experience. Therefore, the boundaries between prostitution, marriage, and the monastery are

fluid: men can move in and out of these three institutions freely (Manderson 1992:451–75). Like the spiritual transformation of man to monk, the sexual encounter also is transformative by awakening the “complete man” in spirit and in sex.

To act as a womanizer (*chaochu*) is meaningful for many men, as it emphasizes a man’s skill at charming women through clever and witty conversation. In classical Thai literature, the *chaochu* image is characteristic of heroic men who are masters of magic in warfare and in love (Anuman 1988:69–70). Thai language is rich in characterizing different kinds of *chaochu* behavior. The term “womanizer eyes” (*da chaochu*) refers to a *chaochu* who gazes at the opposite sex flirtatiously; “womanizer lips” (*pak chaochu*) means a *chaochu* who can enchant women through seductive language. Reinforced by everyday language and practice, *chaochu* has become a category that aims at promoting a man’s virility.

To marry is considered a woman’s natural path. In recent years, however, the number of women choosing to remain single, especially in cities, has greatly increased, and the social stigma attached to remaining unmarried has reduced (Williams and Guest 2005:182). However, a “proper” woman still has to get married, and she is still expected to lose her virginity only to her husband. Becoming a “mother of the house” (*maeban*) is considered the crucial step that turns a woman into a full adult, for childbearing is regarded as a moral action that improves a woman’s karma and maturity (Muecke 1984:462; Whittaker 1999:47). Women become “complete” by having sons who become monks and by providing monks with daily necessities.

Masculinity has multiple meanings. While sending remittances back to the family in China was the key marker of masculine identity among Chinese immigrants before 1949, a middle-class *lukchin* man often demonstrates his manhood by being a successful breadwinner and a *chaochu*. To be the family’s main breadwinner is considered as “natural” for men. A *lukchin* man is rarely encouraged by his family to become a monk but is strongly encouraged to become a business owner. The breadwinner role is articulated through fulfilling one’s responsibility (*khwam raphitchosp*) to the family and supporting the family by doing business. Business success, a key feature of Chinese masculine identity, does not exclude participating in extramarital sex or being a polygynist. Many *lukchin* men have integrated their money-oriented masculinity with the Thai construction of womanizing masculinity. Economic capital in tandem with male sexual privilege encourages Chinese men to show off their masculine identity with polygyny.

Many *lukchin* women receive a good education and become businesswomen or professionals, differing from most of their immigrant mothers who had little education and worked at home. *Lukchin* women have transgressed the conventional inside/outside work domain, but they cannot openly flaunt gendered sex boundaries. Like Thai women, *lukchin* women’s sexual rights are circumscribed and their sexuality restricted to marriage.

Masculinity is not meaningful only for men, or femininity only for women, for the two categories complement each other (Berger, Wallis, and Watson 1995:7).

Some women prefer to have a *chaochu* man as a husband over a “polite man” (*phuchai liaproi*), because a *chaochu* is more charming, fun, and exciting, while a polite man is considered boring and possibly stupid. A few women choose to be a minor wife because they are attracted to a *chaochu* (Fletcher and Gearing 1997). *Chaochu* masculinity influences women’s notion of a desirable spouse.

In the remainder of the article, I focus on who owns and operates family businesses by analyzing the conflicts, negotiations, and interdependence among husbands and wives in everyday life. The ethnography will enable us to see the ambiguities and dynamics that are missing from normative gender expectations. As Chris Lyttleton (2002) suggests, “gender relations are bounded by social norms . . . but also informed by the presence of ambiguities in the lived experience that gender as a dyadic matrix inevitably embodies” (Lyttleton 2002:183).

THREE CASE STUDIES OF POLYGYNY

Wives and Best Friends

Fifty-three-year-old Lili Jie and her 58-year-old husband Chen Laoban⁶ owned a law and accounting firm and had four daughters ranging in age from 11 to 18. When they founded the firm in Bangkok in 1971, Lili Jie and Chen Laoban worked alone. By 1991 they had more than 40 people working for them. A four-story building housed the firm’s offices and also was the family residence. Lili Jie was in charge of daily operations. In addition, she supervised two chauffeurs, a cook, and three live-in domestic workers. She described herself as her husband’s assistant and “mother of the house” for her family and the firm; she took care of the “little things” so her husband, the chief attorney, could spend more time on the “important matters.” Chen Laoban showed his affection for Lili Jie by serving her first at the dinner table. He often gave their children money and expensive gifts. The children seemed proud of their parents. From outward appearances, this was a contented couple and a prosperous, happy family.

During research in 1996, Lili Jie revealed that her husband had married her best friend, Guihua, as a minor wife. Guihua’s Chinese immigrant father abandoned her mother, who then raised Guihua on her own. Guihua had nearly married twice. Her first engagement was broken off by her fiancé the day before the wedding; her next serious boyfriend planned to marry her, but impregnated another woman, which ended their relationship. In the late 1970s, Guihua paid a 30,000 baht bribe (about US\$1,200), disguised herself as a Laotian refugee, and emigrated to Australia. In 1993, she returned to Bangkok for her mother’s funeral. Lili Jie invited her to live with her family and work for the firm, and the two were delightedly living and working together as “sisters.” In an interview, Lili Jie said:

After Guihua had worked in our company for a year, my husband asked me if he could marry her. I was shocked, but he was serious. Yes, he had worked very hard for the family. He said he wanted to

marry her and enjoy his life a little bit. You know, if I had said no, he might have married someone else.

A husband seeking his wife's consent to marry another woman is a common practice among open polygynists in Bangkok. In a separate interview, Chen Laoban explained why he married Guihua: "I am very tired. I am old [63]. I will leave this world very soon. Can't I enjoy my life a little bit? What is life for?" From his perspective, by fulfilling his economic responsibilities to the family, he had earned the right to have a minor wife to please him. As the interview continued, he offered another reason for marrying Guihua:

I married Guihua for my family. She has no children, no family, no burdens. Outside workers are not reliable. A wife is reliable. My children are still too young to take over my business. I need an assistant. I did not marry her for sex. She's fifty years old! It would be funny for me to do that.

Chen Laoban believed that he had sacrificed for his family by not marrying a younger woman. His idea that polygyny would strengthen the family business indicated how enmeshed kinship, work, emotions, and conjugal sex are.

Although Lili Jie wanted to say no to her husband, she feared that he might marry a younger woman who would pose a threat to her family. Lili Jie carefully evaluated the advantages and disadvantages:

Guihua cannot bear children. She can help the firm. And, if my husband married her, we would not need to spend a lot of money getting her Thai citizenship. I thought we would only be adding one more mouth to feed. I put forward two preconditions before consenting to the marriage: first, we all have to endure. When two people quarrel, the third party should not be involved. Second, we all have to live together because he is afraid of being lonely.

Despite having different agendas, Lili Jie and Chen Laoban held several notions in common at this point. Both took men's sexual privilege as a given and negotiated the polygyny as though they were cutting a business deal; both believed that polygyny and a family business could be compatible. Moreover, polygyny was Chen Laoban's reward, Guihua's diminished reproductivity would guarantee the interests of their children, and Guihua would be inexpensive and reliable labor and help expand the family business. Or as Lili Jie put it earlier, "We would only be adding one more mouth to feed."

To further protect her children's and her interests, Lili Jie made her husband transfer their house, the primary bank account, and ownership of the business to her name. Then, on the same day, the two registered their divorce and Chen Laoban and Guihua registered their marriage. Legally, Lili Jie became a divorcée and Chen Laoban and Guihua, a married couple. But in practice, Chen Laoban had two wives. Guihua, I was told, promised Lili Jie that "If you are not happy, I will leave." Although Lili Jie consented to the polygyny, she was still ambivalent about it. Even Chen Laoban observed that and remarked, "I first realized that Lili did not like the

idea of our marriage when we were searching for a lucky wedding day.” Yet, Lili Jie publicly performed well as a generous major wife by organizing and hosting her husband’s wedding ceremony:

I invited several of my good friends to the wedding, held at a hotel. My husband and I sat on a sofa, and my husband said to Guihua, “Lili nodded her head for this marriage [gave permission]. You have to kneel and kowtow to her.” Guihua smiled and said, “It is too embarrassing. Please let me forego this.” She gave me a kiss.

The three behaved along gender lines. The authoritative husband asked his bride to show respect to Lili Jie, conforming to his patriarchal family status in which the major wife is considered superior to the minor. But Guihua did not want to acquiesce so readily. Rather than kowtow, she gave Lili Jie a less submissive kiss. Lili Jie then presented Guihua with a Rolex watch as a wedding gift, an extravagance she never would have bought for herself.

Lili Jie used the wedding ritual to formalize her status as the major wife. Her generosity did not just aim at making her husband happy and smoothing her relationship with her best friend, now co-wife, but proving to her guests that she was a good wife. She explained, “I did not want people to think that my husband married a minor wife because I was a bad wife.” This was in response to the widespread belief that polygynists blame the major wife as the reason for taking a minor wife.

All four daughters were against the polygyny and refused to attend the wedding. Pra, the second daughter, once confronted Lili Jie: “Mom, how can you be so confused? No real friend would steal her best friend’s husband.” Lili Jie thought the children were too young to understand the complexity of the circumstances. She confided that Chen Laoban stayed with her on his wedding night because he was concerned about hurting his children’s feelings by openly sleeping with Guihua. Lili Jie made Chen Laoban go to Guihua’s room. Again, Lili Jie performed as a generous major wife rather than a jealous one. Chen Laoban’s ambivalent behavior may have been related to the conflict between his desire to become a polygynist and his intention to be perceived as a good father by his children.

Lili Jie soon concluded that she had “made a big mistake.” Less than two weeks after the wedding, Guihua pointed out that she was the legal wife and Lili Jie was the ex-wife. Lili Jie was furious: “Let we three go out together and see who is a real wife.” She felt betrayed: “If this had happened to me by someone I did not know, the situation would have been much better. I did so much for her but. . .” Lili Jie had expected Guihua to submit to her authority. However, according to Lili Jie, Guihua put all her energy into pleasing Chen Laoban to win his favor and subverted the longstanding relationship between Lili Jie and Chen Laoban. Guihua, having had traumatizing experiences with her former boyfriends and with the memory of her father abandoning her mother, was perhaps trying every means to protect her marriage. To show Guihua who was the real “mother of the house,” Lili Jie not only had a family portrait taken without Guihua, but also had the portrait enlarged, framed, and hung at the focal point of the living room. Nonetheless, Pra told me that

she hated the portrait because she had experienced the bitterness hidden behind the false smiles. Lili Jie could exclude Guihua from the family portrait, but not from her children's lives.

Chen Laoban decided to send Guihua back to Australia for a year's cooling-off period. The children and Lili Jie thought this was part of his plan to move to Australia with Guihua. He said: "How could I leave my children and my employees behind? I would never do that. Maybe after all my children have M.A. degrees, then I will leave for Australia, or maybe I will become a monk." Chen Laoban again emphasized his economic responsibility, the heart of his masculinity, not only to his family but also to his employees. Instead of having two women to please him and expand the family business, Chen Laoban became endlessly occupied with one crisis after another. He even thought about becoming a monk, leaving his wealth and comfort behind, and sublimating his sexual desire.

What bothered Lili Jie most, however, was not the polygyny per se but her loss of face as a major wife, as Chen Laoban had disrupted the hierarchical order of the two wives. She said: "They stayed at the Shangri-La Hotel when they visited Hong Kong. We only stayed at the Lan Kwai Fong Hotel. I am his major wife. He should have taken me to stay at the Shangri-La Hotel first." By now Lili Jie refused to do secretarial work but only "good tasks" such as dealing with banks and other institutions, because such work gave her "face as the major wife." Moreover, Lili Jie demanded a bigger salary because of her seniority and her status as the major wife. At this stage of her marital life, Lili Jie switched from focusing on the family's interests to competing with Guihua, not so much for her husband's attention, but for the respect and recognition she felt that she deserved.

In 2007, Chen Laoban and Guihua lived by themselves in a new house, not far from the old four-story house and office. He had not become a monk or moved to Australia. Lili Jie told me that the law and accountancy firm was doing well and that two of her four daughters now helped run the business. As we were talking, the eldest daughter asked Lili Jie, "Mom, did you tell Auntie (a fictive kin term acknowledging seniority) Bao that father had a stroke?" "No, we have much more important things to talk about," she replied. Then she turned to me, "He is dead in my heart. We had a good marriage for so many years, but I do not think about him anymore. Isn't it strange? Maybe I was hurt too much."

Hidden Polygyny

In 1982, at age 32, Phi Tatsani married Thaokae Ding. They both worked at a cement factory that Thaokae Ding had inherited from his father. He also had a job on the side and frequently traveled, making business contacts and delivering completed products. At the cement factory, Phi Tatsani, as her husband's assistant, worked in the office, managed customer service, and supervised seasonal laborers. In the summer of 1990, she suspected Thaokae Ding of having an affair. To prove his innocence, Thaokae Ding agreed to let his wife accompany him wherever he

went. After doing so for two months, Phi Tatsani thought her suspicions were unfounded. Then, a Thai woman with three children in tow appeared and knocked on the front door. Without saying a word, she deposited her children on the doorstep and left. She was Thaokae Ding's major wife.

Phi Tatsani was overwhelmed with anger and grief. After eight years of marriage and two children, she abruptly realized that she was a minor wife. Enraged by his betrayal, she grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed Thaokae Ding in the arm. She recalled, "Seeing his blood made me feel better. Many men would have fought back if their wives did this. He did not. After that, I was able to control my heart (*thamchai*)." She believed that he did not fight back because he still cared about their relationship.

Although a major wife's position was considered far superior to a minor wife for both Thai and Chinese, Phi Tatsani never addressed the major wife by name, but used the derogatory term "*i nan*" (that woman). Phi Tatsani told me she was a Thai bar girl supported by Thaokae Ding and knew nothing about running a business. By contrasting occupational, ethnic, and class differences, Phi Tatsani put herself superior to the major wife.

After uncovering Thaokae Ding's hidden polygyny, conjugal tensions spilled over into their work relationship. Phi Tatsani took over the business by forging an alliance with her sister-in-law; she paid her husband a salary, cut her own business deals, and took charge of the income to "keep the money in the family." She was able to add over one million baht (about US\$40,000) to the family's savings account in just two years.

Thaokae Ding never registered either of his marriages. Because Thaokae Ding was no longer able to provide much financial support with Phi Tatsani controlling the purse strings, the major wife decided to file for divorce. Registering a divorce without having registered the marriage is not unusual in Thailand (Napaporn 1989:206). By doing so, a wife can sometimes gain a financial settlement from her husband or, if she is the one who has the money, cut him off completely. Phi Tatsani convinced the major wife not to divorce Thaokae Ding for the sake of the children. She also decided not to register her marriage. She said, "It is better not to register. If I die suddenly, my children will inherit my money. If we register, the money would be managed by my husband." Phi Tatsani believed that Thaokae Ding was born to be a polygynist, having inherited "bad blood" from his father, a polygynist who had three minor wives. Moreover, she no longer trusted her husband. She once asked me, "Do you know the Thai proverb 'when a husband steps down three steps, he is no longer your husband'? Men are untrustworthy (*phuchai chuachai maidai*)." Although she knew that her husband went out on business, she sometimes still imagined that he had gone to visit the major wife, or was having another affair. She described her feelings:

I have one heart for him. He divides his heart into two and gives me half and gives her half. I try to feel indifferent (*choeichoei*). But my heart is still very much in pain (*chepchai mak*). I have to control

my heart (*thamchai*). If I cannot? I have no alternative. I have to swallow it, even when I feel I cannot swallow any more.

These highly charged emotional terms—feeling “indifferent,” “controlling her heart,” and “swallowing her pain”—reveal how difficult it was for her to live with a husband that she no longer trusted but still cared for. In the interviews, she often forced a smile while tears ran down her face, expressing the mixed emotions she was experiencing. As she put it, her life was being filled with various flavors: “some sweet, some bitter, and some sour” (*mi pieo, wan, man, khem*).

At a farewell dinner they arranged for me at a restaurant, Phi Tatsani poured beer for her husband and peeled his shrimp. Her actions were in sharp contrast to the anger and pain she had expressed in our interviews. She made a great effort to stay in Thaokae Ding’s good graces and to present herself as a devoted wife. When dinner was over, she and I fought for the check. Thaokae Ding looked uncomfortable. What was on public display was not just Thaokae Ding’s masculine identity highlighted by him drinking and being served by his wife but also his embarrassment over his diminished economic power. Phi Tatsani hid her anger and distrust and performed her role as the caring wife, while also displaying her economic power.

Although he was no longer in charge of the family business, Thaokae Ding retained his sex privileges. In the past he had secretly rotated between two homes with the excuse of having a second job. Now he openly traveled between his two wives. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he spent the night with his Thai wife; on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and weekends he stayed with Phi Tatsani. The disjunction between Thaokae Ding’s sexual privilege and Phi Tatsani’s economic power created tensions in the family business as well as in their conjugal relationship.

A Meatball Factory and Seven Wives

Sopat Trirapahpsukonwong, or “Teko,” has been a celebrated polygynist in Thailand since the 1980s because of his seven wives and 22 children, all of whom live and work “harmoniously” under one roof at a three-story house and meatball factory (Branigin 1985). Teko was born into a poor Chinese immigrant family in 1944. At age eight, he had to get up in the middle of night and help his father prepare food to sell at a vending stall on the street. In 1966, when Teko was 22, he married his first wife and they lived in a place west of Bangkok. In the late 1960s, after holding various menial jobs including noodle vendor, Teko opened a meatball factory. But it was not until after he had married his sixth and seventh wives in 1983 that the factory began turning enough of a profit to make ends meet. The creation and expansion of his polygynous family occurred simultaneously with the establishment and growth of the meatball factory. This again exemplifies how two seemingly unrelated enterprises, polygyny and the family business, are inextricably linked. He promoted his “Teko” brand of meatballs by implying that his special recipe was the source of his sexual prowess (Branigin 1985).

In appearance Teko is nondescript, and slightly overweight, but according to the locals, he had *chaochu* eyes and *chaochu* lips. Teko said, "I am the kind of person who is very easygoing, and I get to know a lot of women. These women like me and love me, I just can't resist them" (*CNN International*, Feb. 18, 2001). By emphasizing that women were after him, not the other way around, he highlighted his charm, which served him well with women. His powers of persuasion were such that, Teko told me, he convinced the parents of wives numbers six and seven to allow him to marry both on the same day so as to "save money."

Teko's first wife was Teochiu Chinese, his second was Hakka Chinese; and his other five wives were Thai. His first marriage was registered but the others were customary marriages. He claimed that he had asked his first wife for permission to marry his second wife, but in a 1985 newspaper article, Siem-ung, the first wife, said that she was "furious" when Teko took a second wife just one month after their wedding (Branigin 1985). Seventeen years later, Siem-ung said that "her husband's unwavering love for her stopped her from divorcing him" (Kaneko 2002).

Teko emphasized that what was most important to him was not sex but understanding one another so as to work happily together. He told one journalist, "I've trained them [his wives] to be hardworking, reasonable, and kind" (*CNN International*, Feb. 18, 2001). Forming meatballs by hand over and over on an assembly line, his wives certainly worked hard. By the 1990s, demand was such that the factory was producing as many as 120,000 meatballs a day. The wives took turns working, eating, and sleeping to meet the daily quota: "family members work around the clock on a three-shift basis" (Kaneko 2002). In addressing my question about child care Teko said, "Each wife takes care of her children. But they help each other. For instance, the first wife served food to the younger wife after she gave birth." The wives worked doubly hard, first at the factory and then at home. Teko, who promoted diligence as part of his work ethic, did not regard taking care of children as one of his responsibilities. Important here is not just who is being organized but who is doing the organizing. Teko organized his wives as seven employees whom he could monitor and supervise 24 hours a day, seven days a week.⁷ All his children have worked either at the meatball factory in one capacity or another or in domestic work. His polygynous family supplied Teko with a pool of free labor.

Regarding how finances were managed Teko said, "My wives can ask for money from me, when they or their children need money. I give money according to the need. I do not give my wives pocket money." When his second wife won 800,000 baht [about US\$32,000] in the lottery, it was Teko who collected her winnings because "she used family money to buy the lottery ticket." He continued, "If I give 100 baht [US\$4] to each wife, one saves the money and another spends the money. So in 10 years, one wife would be much richer than another wife. A wife might cheat her husband or the other wives to gain more money."

While his seven wives shifted among different productive and reproductive spaces, Teko shifted among seven bedrooms sleeping with a different wife every day of the week. Teko proudly showed me a picture of his wedding with his fourth wife

and called my attention to the fact that wives number one, two, and three were all visibly pregnant. The simultaneous pregnancies of his three wives were presented as evidence of his sexual prowess and his prolific reproductivity. He wanted me to know that he treated all his wives equally. “When I married the sixth and the seventh, that night was the turn of the fourth wife. So I slept with the fourth one. Some men, they could not do that. I did it according to the rules.” He also told a journalist, “My wives take turns to spend the night with me. If I go away, I always remember who’s next in line” (*Reuters*, Feb. 16, 2001). Apparently the principle of equality that Teko exercises is to have each wife get no payment for her factory work, child care, and domestic labor, and an identical number of opportunities to sleep with him.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF POLYGyny

The lukchin men’s and women’s stories and experiences suggest that polygyny is not the product of “men’s nature.” Rather it is informed by the political economy and identity politics. The naturalization of Thai men’s sexual privilege not only conceals power relationships, socio-economic forces, and gender inequality, but also masks the hybrid cultural construction of masculine identity—a combination of Thai *chaochu* masculinity and immigrant Chinese money-oriented masculinity. One of the most far-reaching effects of naturalizing social categories and men’s sexual privilege is to compel men and women to perceive conjugal problems not as expressions of larger social issues but as personal.

In practice, lukchin polygyny has continually responded to social contingencies. The Chinese immigrant polygynists who had no sons specifically stated that their motivation for having a second wife was to have a son to continue the family line (Bao 2005:80). But not one lukchin polygynist, including Chen Laoban, who had only daughters, ever talked about taking a minor wife in order to have a son to continue his family line. Nor did lukchin polygynists practice *liangtoujia* (literally, a family on both ends); i.e., having one wife in China and one in Thailand, which is a distinctive polygynous configuration among Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia until 1949 (Chen 1940:140; Willmott 1967:42). More important, open polygyny is no longer practiced by lukchin and Thais who have emigrated to the United States.

The criteria for evaluating masculinity with this population have changed (Bao 2008:255–56). In Thailand, a husband’s fidelity to his wife is not a primary indicator of his masculinity. In the United States, the appearance of fidelity is often considered crucial for the viability of a marriage. More important markers for masculinity than sexual prowess are affluence, owning a house in a desirable neighborhood, driving an expensive car, and sending the children to good schools—all indicators of middle-class status. At the same time, the appeal of running family businesses has decreased, while high paying professional jobs have become more attractive. Moreover, lukchin and Thai women in the United States have become less tolerant of *chaochu*

masculinity (Bao 2005:186–87). Thais have the highest divorce rate among Asian Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2004:7).

The criteria for expressing feminine identity or being a “good wife” also have changed (Bao 1999:108–10). In Thailand, a divorced woman is often blamed for being selfish and for not working hard enough to maintain the marriage. The typical Thai model of a “strong woman” is a wife who tolerates and negotiates with an unfaithful husband to preserve the marriage for the sake of the children. But the image of a strong woman in the United States differs. She may work during the day, attend school at night to earn a degree, and choose to be a single mother rather than put up with a *chaochu* husband. The *lukchin* men and women have developed different strategies in different locations; their gendered practices and emotions are embedded in time-specific economic and political conditions.

The family is not only a social unit but also an economic, emotional, and ideological unit. Production, reproduction, and conjugal sexuality are not automatically yoked. Polygynous men understand very well the relationship between family and business, and between wife and laborer. Indeed, a family can be defined not in terms of sexual intimacy but by relationships of dependency. “Husband” and “wife” are not natural categories; they carry the connotations of hierarchy. Conjugal categories secured through marriage increase in polygyny by establishing hierarchies between wives. The classifications of major and minor wife make it possible for some women to monitor and discipline other women. Minor wives have often been depicted as gold diggers for stepping up into a more affluent life. Some do seek security and use marriage as a vehicle for upward mobility. Nevertheless, polygyny does not necessarily consist of a rich man with a poor but young and attractive minor wife. Rather, a woman might be duped and suddenly discover that she is a minor wife; or she might find a charismatic *chaochu* attractive and choose to marry him, regardless of his economic or marital status.

Marriage fosters and reproduces fundamental ideas of masculine and feminine identity. But feminine and masculine identity, at least in part, is mediated by polygyny. Masculinity is not only practiced by men but reinforced by women. Thinking at the intersections—taking kinship, socio-economic conditions, sexuality, and emotions into account—is the key to comprehending how nature is empowered by culture in daily life, and how various notions of masculinity/femininity, family/business, and money/sex are woven into polygynous relationships and practices.

NOTES

1. I thank William Jankowiak, Debra Martin, Deborah Boehm, and Peter Gray for their helpful suggestions, and I deeply thank all those in Bangkok and Thailand who assisted me in this research.
2. Following conventional practice, Thai authors are cited by first name and listed in the bibliography by first name first, family name second. Thai words follow the system in *Romanization Guide for Thai Script*.
3. The World Factbook. 2007. Thailand. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html> (accessed Oct. 20, 2008).

4. Since 1988, I have conducted research among Chinese Thai in Bangkok with interviews and participant observation (Bao 2005). The three polygynous families presented here were part of this population. Two families lived in downtown Bangkok; the third family lived some 60 kilometers outside of Bangkok.

I was unable to interview every polygynous man and woman in these families. In one case, when I requested an interview with her husband, the minor wife asked me not to and to pretend that I knew nothing about their marital problems. In another case, a member of the first family was concerned that my interviewing other family members might create tension in their complicated relationship, and add to family turmoil.

5. The World Factbook. 2007. Thailand. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html> (accessed Oct. 20, 2008).

6. All names in this essay are pseudonyms except those of well known public figures.

7. Teko respected seniority among his wives. A senior wife had more privileges than a junior one. In a family photograph Teko gave me, the first wife sat at his right and the second wife sat at his left. The most junior wife sat the furthest away from him.

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