

## CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

Sex is so fundamental to the Western world view, we sometimes fail to consider other interpretations, especially when the concepts seem so similar. This becomes a much more difficult task for U.S. anthropologists as globalization brings to the world Western images and ideas about sex, some of which are rejected, others of which are integrated into local cultures. But even when integrated, the concepts take on new meanings. How they are integrated and what they mean in new cultural contexts depends on how they are married with preexisting and other incoming concepts. Sex is a challenging aspect of a culture to study because it is broad, pervasive, and so seemingly "natural." These qualities, which render it challenging, also make it vitally important to understand if one want to understand much about a culture at all.

The achievement of this study is, I believe, its successful articulation of an extremely broad and culturally integrated concept, *phêet* (sex) in Thailand. Rather than distracting the reader with overly simplified "answers" to the question What is *phêet*?, it arms the reader with a variety of information to allow the reader to begin to understand *phêet*, at least from the social and cultural position of university students in Mahasarakham, in different contexts. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study revealed what students in Mahasarakham mean when they talk about *phêet* and how they chop the concept up into meaningful categories, meanings that emerge in relation to other concepts.

Isan students' understandings of and relationships to concepts associated with sex likely differ from students at, for example, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok or Chiang Mai University in the North. Isan students speak a different language, have their own festivals, eat different foods, look different, face different kinds of stereotypes and discrimination, have grown up among a people culturally and historically connected to both the Lao and Siamese, and are oriented differently to the dominant central region. It cannot be assumed that their world is sexed in the same way as all Thais; research must be done to investigate the similarities and differences.

This is a first step for sorting out the meanings of sex in Northeast Thailand, and a step towards future regional comparisons in Thailand as a whole.

SWU students are in a transitional phase of their lives, in the process of taking on the responsibilities of adults. Male and female students experience life differently. Not only do they have different interests and face different situations, but the expectations placed upon them differ. Sex-related expectations are not limited to families, where much socialization takes place, but come from many different sources, including the local social environment, the university, Bangkok, which dominates Thailand's economic, political, and cultural discourse, and abroad. These sources are sometimes in agreement and other times in conflict. It is in these loci of tension that students have the most room to negotiate their own (individual) meanings, and here where at a societal level much culture change takes place. To get at the meanings of *phêet*, this study explored different aspects to the concept as well as related concepts that contribute to an understanding of it, particularly those that appear to be incongruous.

### **The Complexity of the Cultural Construct *Phêet***

The concept *phêet*, though easily defined in a Thai-English dictionary ("kind, sex, gender in grammar," Sethaputra, 1994) is much more complex in social practice. It refers to sexual behavior, two categories of humans (*phêetyǐng*, female sex, and *phêetchaay*, male sex), and less directly to social categories. The more commonly used sex-related categories are *phûuyǐng* (girl/woman) and *phûuchaay* (boy/man). In most instances, *phûuyǐng* and *phûuchaay* mirror the biological categories *phêetyǐng* and *phêetchaay*, but there is some flexibility. A person may be *phêetchaay* and *phûuyǐng*, that is, biologically a male, but socially a girl/woman. Many *kàthœy* are like this. Likewise, a person may also conceptually be a *phêetyǐng* and a *phûuchaay*.

It has been shown that SWU university students recognize and distinguish between *sex* (categories sorting physical bodies) and *gender* (categories sorting social roles) both conceptually and linguistically. They do not, however, have words that correspond to the terms *sex* and *gender*.

This caused some difficulty for this researcher: How to get students to talk about the social aspects of sex without redefining *phêet* for them? Usually, I resorted to explanations that in essence did define the concept (e.g., What about being a man and being a woman? How do these relate to *phêet*?). However, students seemed comfortable talking about gender, even when I'd said I was interested in learning about the topic of *phêet*. Most Isaners' biological and social sex are the same, and this is considered the preferred situation, the norm, so *phêet* invokes both meanings, indirectly if not directly.

Because of the preference for *phêetyǎng* (females) being *phûuyǎng* (girls/women) and *phêetchaay* (males) being *phûuychaay* (boys/men), intermediate categories (*kàthæy*, *kee*, and *thøøm-dii*) are socially criticized, even though socially recognized. *Kàthæy*, *kee*, and *thøøm-dii* are most criticized when they most stand out and challenge the existing social order, that is, cause social disharmony. The stereotype of *kàthæy* as being loud, overtly sexual, and comedic, with sexy, modern clothes, lots of makeup, and coiffed hair is an example of the kind of intersexed person who does not fit into the existing social order. Neither men nor women should act like this in social settings. *Kàthæy*, whether males or females, can fit in if they adopt either the normal social roles of men or women. Indeed, male *kàthæy*, were often described as excelling at women's activities such as cooking, sewing, and designing. Acceptance of *kàthæy* who fully adopt an existing social role does not require community members to make adjustments to their social order.<sup>1</sup> Since *kàthæy* cannot reproduce, the only relevance of their biological makeup is in relation to sexual behavior, a private matter. Surely community members may discuss or joke about it, but that is probably true for any scenario people see as unusual or interesting.

Additionally, some students assume that in sexual intercourse (with men), the male *kàthæy* has

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<sup>1</sup> The *thøøm-dii* relationship may also be acceptable if each party fully adopts a different social role (i.e., one the man's role, one the women's). A *thøøm-dii* relationship, played out socially as a man and woman, may do this. I am unable to do more than speculate since I did not speak to or know of any *thøøm-dii* in Mahasarakham.

the receptive role, mirroring the copulatory role of a woman, further reinforcing the *kàthøey*'s social status as a woman.

*Kee* and *thøøm-dii* find less social acceptance than do *kàthøey*, because it is difficult for them to both be "out" and fit into the social order. Many, even some SWU students, consider *kee* and *thøøm-dii* mentally defective. Jackson (1999) writes,

Based on a masculine-feminine binarism, the Thai sex/gender order is maintained so long as a male upholds his status through the performance of masculinity, or conversely, if he abandons his masculinity and assumes the feminized status of *kathoey*. (p. 239)

*Kee* and *thøøm-dii* are sexually ambiguous in terms of social roles, not in terms of biological or erotic sex as in the US. Sexual behavior, because it is private and does not define sexual identity or preference, is secondary to social performance. Adherence to existing public social roles, some of which can be quite flexible, is much more important. The inability to resolve the daily life practices of *kee* and *thøøm-dii* with existing social categories creates confusion and social conflict. Closeted *kee* and *thøøm-dii* may be able to maintain the appearance of "real men" (*phûuchaay th[]* males who adopt men's social roles) and "real women" (*phûuying th[]* women who adopt women's social roles), and thus reduce social conflict and hostility, by marrying and carrying on same-sex relationships outside of their marriage. Others find less clandestine ways to accommodate their relationships. *Kee* and *thøøm-dii* encounter criticism when they *sad[]hg òøk*, that is, publicly show that they are *kee* or *thøøm-dii*. Jackson (1999) describes this as "an unspoken but almost universally understood ethic of 'don't ask, don't tell'...an open secret amongst family, work colleagues, and heterosexual friends" (pp. 237-238). As long as they adopt normative gender roles, social conflict is minimized.

Maintaining social harmony includes maintaining social order. So examining those who fall in between or outside "normal" categories can help to clarify what exactly the social order is. This is why, although relatively few students are *kathoey*, *kee*, or *thøøm-dii*, I spend a great deal of time discussing them. Sometimes the rules become clearer when they are broken. Although

SWU students and the SWU community in general believe they are more tolerant and understanding of *kee* (and *thoøm-dîi*) than less educated, less cosmopolitan people, there is still a marked disapproval expressed for *kee*, which is conveyed in indirect comments (e.g., putdowns of men who are not acting masculine enough by suggesting they may be "*kee*"). And though I did not knowingly speak to any *thoøm-dîi*, they were mentioned primarily in negative contexts (e.g., the student screaming at her alleged lover's door in a jealous rage).

Changes in the social structure and economy have increased opportunities for *kee* and *thoøm-dîi* to live comfortably without having to adopt traditional social roles. More highly educated *kee* and *thoøm-dîi* are able to live self-sufficiently without a traditional spouse, because their livelihood depends on cash, not traditional cooperative labor. With good, stable jobs, they can also continue to take care of their parents, providing them with the cash necessary to survive in modern society (more pertinent to women than men). Further, the wealth and status that comes with a professional job, elevates the individual, regardless of sexual identity, to a higher status. I heard many times from many different people that having money helps people forgive one's transgressions. As Nuu, a *kathoey*, explained, if you have money, people will say that whatever you do is good. These same changes in the social organization and economy have also increased opportunities for "real" men and women to redefine their traditional roles. Economic self-sufficiency allows one to meet one's family and social obligations and become an adult, without the experience of marriage, children, remaining with one's parents, or ordination, though of course these things are still desired by many students. Although marriage is still considered by most to enrich and complete life,<sup>2</sup> there is much less pressure to marry imposed on individuals who are self-sufficient, particularly if they are also able to contribute to their parents' well-being.

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<sup>2</sup> Students frequently use the term *sõmbuun* to describe their hope for married life. *Sõmbuun* means fully supplied, replete, complete, healthy, perfect, abundant, rich, fertile (Haas, 1964, p. 522; Sethaputra, 1994, p. 883). Marriage is thought to make life richer and more complete, largely through parenthood. This notion is carried to some degree toward other species. Dogs and cats are often not spayed or neutered until after having at least one litter (or never at all) because some feel that to fix them would deny them a natural part of their life's fulfillment.

If they are able to care for their parents, regardless of their marital status, they are fulfilling a primary obligation of children. Both male and female students have more options for fulfilling their roles as men and women.

### **Comparing Men and Women**

This brings me back to the primary categories of male and female and their respective social forms, men and women. Students maintain some very strong ideas about differences between men and women. Some of these differences serve to exaggerate male and female bodily differences (further suggesting the conceptual interrelatedness of sex and gender).

Physically, men are stronger and harder. Women are weaker and softer. Playing up these characteristics has the effect of making one more feminine or masculine, differences that are reinforced by text and images in magazines (Costa & Matzner, 2002), movies, and on television (Hesse-Swain, 1992). Women's bodies are maintained in part by refraining from hard, physical work. Traditionally, women were and continue to be assigned tasks that, though sometimes backbreaking (e.g., transplanting and harvesting rice), do not so much require muscular strength as stamina. Men's bodies are maintained and enhanced (in terms of masculinity) by engaging in physical activity in both work and recreation. Whether socially- or self-imposed, these socially rewarded behaviors serves to reinforce beliefs about other differences between men and women.

It should be noted that the difference between men's and women's bodies do not appear to indicate asymmetric status. If anything, students spoke more highly of women's bodies. Women's bodies are seen as more attractive, cleaner, and more fragrant than male bodies. Neither the male nor female body is superior -- they are simply different, serving different purposes.

Although both male and female students concurred that there is no overall intellectual difference between men and women, they feel very strongly about certain qualities associated with one or the other sex. These beliefs have consequences on the kind of activities and jobs appropriate for each sex. Students' understandings of how men and women (or tend to be)

supports the existing division of labor. For example, women are characterized as having more self-control (and display this in their behaviors) but are also believed to be naturally more *jayòøn*, or impressionable and easily influenced. Because women are *jayòøn*, they are not good decision-makers and require protection and leadership. This is a common explanation for why there are few top level women politicians, bus and taxi drivers, and doctors.<sup>3</sup> Women's *jayòøn* qualities make them unsuitable for these occupations that require making quick decisions and taking charge; men are not so *jayòøn* and so are more suitable leaders, both in the family and in society.

### **The Social Context and Meanings of Sexual Behavior for Men and Women**

In Mahasarakham, young men and women grow up against a background of various expressions of relative gender balance and imbalance. The tensions between Isan and Bangkok, tradition and modernity, are evident. These are not usually uncomfortable tensions which force one to choose sides, but rather tensions which allow one to move back and forth depending on the situation.

Village life, in which most SWU students grew up, is neither puritanical nor highly sexualized, at least in comparison to the US. In Isan villages, boys and girls grow up rather openly, sometimes sharing a bedroom with their parents (who are discreet in their sexual activities), watching animals mate and give birth, and listening to stories of human love and passion. At festivals, such as *Sǒngkraan* (New Year) and *Bhun Bång Fay* (Rocket Festival), they are exposed to and educated about sexuality as they listen to sexual banter, see neighbors prancing about with wooden phalli, and watch puppets simulate copulation. Sexual expression is something that has an appropriate place and time, but is a normal part of everyone's life.

In even mildly urban settings such as the small municipal district of Mahasarakham, sexual expression is more extensive, in part because it is commercialized. It is used to market products and is displayed more widely than in villages. Calendars featuring nude women hang in

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<sup>3</sup> In actuality, there are a number of women doctors in Mahasarakham, though they are concentrated in obstetrics/gynecology and pediatrics, fields dealing with women and children.

food shops, courtesy of various sponsoring companies. Chicly dressed, well-coiffed men and women in suggestive poses advertise products from perfume to eating utensils. Misty illustrations of couples making love (female breasts and all crotches concealed) accompany romance stories in women's magazines. And men can pick up *The International Magazine for Men* by Penthouse, which includes both information on men's fashion and provocative photographs of nude women (though no shots of exposed crotches as in the US version).

The meanings the mass media and government attach to sex are powerful, in some circumstances accepted, in others contested. SWU students reject elements that threaten their views of appropriate lifestyles, such as references to casual sex ("free sex"). At the same time, they seem to integrate elements of what they perceive as sophisticated and modern into rather traditional roles as sons and daughters.

The cultural rules about sexual behavior in Mahasarakham, on the surface, seem relatively straightforward and further reinforce the categories men and women. Women are expected to demonstrate self-control in all ways. They are expected to refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage, or at least outside of a commitment to marriage. Men are permitted, if not encouraged, to wander, quite literally in their teenage years and figuratively after that, gathering experience, including sexual experience. Until HIV struck Thailand, both girlfriends and wives tolerated men visiting prostitutes because of the belief that men require greater variety and quantity of sexual activity. Men's lives are stressful and sex is a form of stress relief. The spread of HIV has triggered a rethinking of this attitude because of the health risks associated with it, risks that are made abundantly clear in television ads, on posters, and in educational pamphlets.

The concept of sexual monogamy is now developing in Mahasarakham as something of value for both men and women. For women, it was always the social expectation. For men, it is something quite new. Multiple sexual partners, before and after marriage, has historically served to enhance masculinity. Except in the monkhood, sexual restraint is not expected of men. As the

concept of monogamy creeps into the cultural body of knowledge, it has the potential to affect husband-wife relationships in both positive and negative ways. If women benefit from monogamy (e.g., more attention, greater sexual satisfaction), it could contribute to a redefining of sex ideology. If women see it is greater sacrifice to satisfy their husbands, then it may add more stress husband-wife relationships.

Isan culture now includes the belief that sexual pleasure is a male domain and sexual relationships are largely for the benefit of men. Much public discourse, probably influenced by ideas from Bangkok, plays down women's sexual desires, emphasizing women's interest in reproduction, rather than erotic stimulation. So, once a woman has had children, she has no real use for sex and it becomes a chore. Women who think like this are quite amenable to their husbands' visiting prostitutes or seeking sexual satisfaction outside of the marriage. There is evidence that historically Isan culture recognized that wives, too, have sexual needs. Proverbs and folktales state that it is a husband's duty to fulfill his wife's sexual needs. Nowadays, the idea of sex being primarily for the enjoyment of men is being challenged, primarily in western-influenced mass media and among the more highly educated. However, even some SWU professors who believe scientific studies of female physical sexual response, continue to contribute to the discourse on women's disinterest in sex for pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Students, too, reflect this perspective to some extent in their discourse. However, students of both sexes seem hopeful that they will have enjoyable sexual relationships with their future spouses.

Although there is some ambiguity, sexual experience tends to improve the status of men and worsen the status of women. A nurse at the anonymous clinic explained it this way: "The woman [in a relationship] wants to be his last, the man wants to be her first." Her comments are fairly consistent with SWU students' attitudes and behaviors, though SWU men don't appear to be

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<sup>4</sup> This may not be hypocritical. Women may be recognized as having sexual desire and response, but that desire and response may fail to be stimulated, either intentionally or unintentionally. This is an issue beyond the scope of this particular study.

as sexually active as males in the general Thai population. The nurse went on to explain that more highly educated people understand that sexual behavior is controllable. The students, despite their education and only in part because of their inexperience and age, are not fully convinced of this, nor are some of the SWU faculty -- some of the most educated people in the province. The idea that men require a great deal of sexual release and variety is still very strong, as is the idea that women have far less desire and interest in sex. Masculinity and femininity are tied up in each, respectively, which puts men and women in difficult situations.

Because men typically gain status by initiating and engaging in sexual behaviors and women typically lose status by doing so, female students must carefully weigh the consequences of their actions when considering entering into any kind of romantic or sexual relationship. Men are potential predators precisely because they have little to lose by trying -- whereas even the implication of a sexual relationship can severely damage a woman's reputation. But of course, all men are not sexual predators, and SWU men appear more conscious than most of maintaining a good reputation, albeit a masculine one.

The difference in meaning of sexual behavior reinforces an emotional asymmetry. Female students are more cautious in romance whereas males are given more leeway in expressing emotion. Among SWU students, men usually express a romantic interest first, but only after ascertaining with good certainty that the girl returns the feelings. But men, too, are limited in how expressive they can be. Extreme emotions are not appropriate, particularly negative ones (e.g., anger, sadness). Emotional control avoids social conflict.

In a study of young, urban, educated, Vietnamese women, Soucy (2001) describes how the ideology of romantic love, conveyed through mass media, has strengthened a waning patriarchal Confusian gender ideology as well as a traditional emphasis on the older brother-younger sibling relationship (similar to the *phôi-nóong* relationship in Thailand). Despite twentieth century reforms that empowered Vietnamese women, it is now seen as romantic for

women to be sweet and submissive and let their boyfriends make decisions about activities. This is a concept worth examining in Isan. Although Isaners have a literary history that includes tales of romantic love, in practice, romantic love has been less important than other considerations in marital relationships. Passion is something sought by men (and women, with less social toleration) outside of marriage, though whether this is the same or different from romantic behavior or love is not clear. Students use the borrowed word "romantic" with some regularity, suggesting that it is a new concept, or perhaps an older concept that has taken on new meanings.

Young men and women at Srinakharinwirot University are coming of age in a culture that doesn't openly tell them how to do that, a culture that sometimes presents them with conflicting models and discourses. The messages, many of which are presented in the mass media and come from Bangkok, are particularly inconsistent for women. On the one hand, young women are presented as being modest, virginal homebodies, devoted to first their parents and then their parents, husband, and children. On the other hand, they are also shown to be modern consumers who are fashionable, sexy, and independent. There is also a hint of traditional Isan sex ideology which values women's home and craft skills such as weaving and cooking. Increasingly, Isan women are also exposed to role models who choose not to marry and give birth, an image in direct conflict with the traditional model.

Young men, too, face ideological tensions between traditional and modern. One noticeable difference is the small number of university-educated men who ordain. Ordination transforms men from unripe (*dìp*) to ripe (*sùk*). A man's spiritual value is elevated when he ordains. Upon leaving the monkhood, men are considered more learned and are more respected. The significance of ordination is marginalized in the image of a modern man, whereas in the past it was a key part of masculinity. This begs the question, how is maturity now marked in a young man? Graduation? A job? Marriage? Ordination at a later point? It would be valuable to follow up

with SWU students to learn at what point they consider themselves mature adults and what events and experiences transformed and marked that new status.

There is no similar systematic transformation for girls. In both historical and modern times, the major socially-recognized life transformation for women seems to be giving birth. But it is not referred to in the same raw-ripe terms as the male transformation in monkhood.<sup>5</sup> Further, there is no spiritual significance in giving birth, nor is the status change named; a woman simply becomes a "mother." Even women who have never given birth can be called "mother" in social relationships by age-appropriate individuals. Giving birth is perhaps more a life-fulfilling event than a life-transforming one.

Modern adolescence does not deviate drastically from the old. Boys are still given greater mobility and license to experiment, and girls are watched more carefully closer to home. But the pursuit of education may actually limited boys' freedom and changed some of their attitudes while expanding girls' freedom.<sup>6</sup> Girls are permitted to travel distances to study and in doing so move farther from their parents' control. Boys who continue their studies at universities and colleges must carefully balance play and study. Their responsibilities as a student prevent the kind of ribald play that young village men engage in.

University culture may reduce some status differences in the gender ideology of young men and young women, bringing them closer to a common ground. SWU student have a greater number of acceptable options for expressing masculinity and femininity than did Isaners in the past, though their social roles remain traditionally distinct and complementary.

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<sup>5</sup> This contradicts Keyes (1977, p. 158) who seeing the act of "lying by the fire" as transforming a woman from unripe to ripe (or cooked, in this case). Traditionally, a woman spent the 30 days following giving birth to lying next to a fire in her home. This helped her to recover, the heat specifically helping her body to heal and reshape the uterus. I don't agree with the comparison to ordination because the woman is actually transformed at the birth and the only linguistic designation is "mother," used as fictive kin term even for women who have not given birth.

<sup>6</sup> This is similar to the point that Mills (1999) makes about Isan women gaining freedom when they travel to Bangkok to work in factories.

### ***Phêet in the Social Order***

SWU students are remarkably "good" young men and women. There appear to be relatively few outliers in terms of conforming to ideals related to being men and being women at this stage in their lives. Most express great respect for their parents and a strong desire (backed up by performance) to do well in school. They show appropriate respect for those of higher status and in general are quite neat and modest in appearance and behavior. They are pursuing degrees to improve their chances at finding a good job so they are able to take care of themselves and their family.

The restrictions separating men and women in their home lives are lessened at the university due to the normal, everyday activities associated with being a student. Modern conveniences, such as bicycles and motorcycles, further facilitate contact. Additionally, students see value in forming friendships with members of the other sex, as companions, study-partners, and advisors. Mixed sex friendships usually do not draw attention if the friends are conscientious of appearance. That is, as long as students keep their time together public, are open about their friendship, and are not physically affectionate, their relationships are socially accepted. However, since many a couple conceals their love as friendship, people are always on the watch for signs of a romance. Though it is considered a demonstration of bad character, gossiping is common. Because of this, everyone is aware of attentive eyes and thus is highly conscious of appearances, even those who blatantly challenge social rules. Students who have *f[ ]h* (sweethearts) must make an extra effort to appear polite and orderly if they want to maintain a good reputation in the community.

Students date for fun and companionship. Dating is most commonly done in groups and may involve meals, movies, picnicking, or sometimes visiting a bar. Even students who have a *f[ ]h* most often go out in groups. It's more fun than going out as a couple and it protects the couple from potential gossip.

Sexual behavior is extremely personal and hidden from public knowledge. Those aspects of sex that are considered private (e.g., erotic behavior) are not well documented in the ethnographic or other literature for Isan youth. Although sexual behavior is considered a natural and necessary part of human life, one's personal sexual behavior is generally not considered an appropriate topic for public revelation or discussion. Further, because students are discouraged even from forming romantic-type relationships, they are reluctant to speak (or write) about their own sexual behaviors. The data obtained in this study suggest that most girls are not having sexual intercourse. Some are, in almost all cases with boyfriends. I was told of a few alleged cases of female students having affairs with male teachers. I did not attempt to validate this information, though I consider it fairly reliable. There were also alleged incidences of students selling sexual services. Neither of these last two situations is normal, typical, or socially acceptable, but they happen.

The number of boys who have had sexual intercourse is surely greater, though students perceive an overall decrease in male interpersonal sexual behavior. As one fourth year male related, when he was a sophomore, more male students were going to prostitutes. By senior year, they decided it wasn't a good idea because of the risk of AIDS. As it has gradually come to be viewed as something foolish, the number of students participating appears to have declined.

Regardless of this study's inability to determine students' actual sexual behavior, their willingness to enter into sexual relationships in certain situations (e.g., if in a serious relationship with plans to marry) is significant. I would argue that this is the perfect time to provide sex education, especially for females in this group. They are not yet for the most part sexually active, but are seeking relationships in which they would consider engaging in sexual relations. Information on birth control, disease prevention, and reproductive health is highly relevant to them at this point in their lives and they are receptive to it. Despite the inappropriateness of discussing one's own sexual behavior (and the embarrassment that might accompany it), being

informed about this very normal part of life is seen as a positive thing. It is not improper or immodest to want to know about sex and related topics.

Students are encouraged to be modest in appearance and behavior. The expression most used to convey this is "*ríapróøy*." There is no English word that conveys all the nuances of *ríapróøy*. Something that is *ríapróøy* is orderly, neat, tidy, in place. That is, the *ríapróøy* thing is as it should be. Students are supposed to be neat, polite, and modest. But the greater determinant of whether someone is *ríapróøy* is his or her public social behavior. Of course, ideally one's private behavior is also socially appropriate. But private behavior is not so much the concern of others. A student may engage in inappropriate behaviors (e.g., drinking, sex), and if it is kept private, still maintain a *ríapróøy* appearance. Private acts are largely regarded as one's own business, the consequences of which will be enjoyed or suffered by the individual.

It is important to comment on the role of morality, particularly in sexual behavior, because the Isan application of morality to real life is somewhat different than in mainstream U.S. culture. U.S. culture formulates rules about right and wrong, and to break one of these rules is wrong, a sin, to commit an immoral act. Culturally, the rules tend to be absolute, though individual practice may show different interpretations of the rules. Among SWU students, right and wrong are not so black and white. In Mahasarkham, as in most of Thailand, moral codes are inseparable from the cosmological order, which is based in Theravada Buddhism. In short, one's good deeds will be rewarded and bad deeds will be punished, in either the present or a future life. Individuals' souls are reborn over time into many different lives in which their karmic past is worked out. One cannot escape past deeds and one's present situation is, to a large extent, attributable to them.

This moral order says little about specific behaviors, so a great variety of behaviors can be understood to be moral in context. Morality is tied to everything one does, not adherence to or violation of specific codes. Further, sex is no more inherently a moral issue than is studying or

distributing food. Right and wrong, accrual of merit (*bun*) or demerit (*bàap*), are the consequence of one's action in a particular context.

Despite the third precepts<sup>7</sup> which says to refrain from sexual misconduct, there is no consensus as to what that means. It is variously interpreted as adultery, illicit sex, sexual misconduct, and erotic behavior. Many students believe this applies to married people only. As one male student informed me, premarital sex "is not in conflict with the Buddhist precepts because if you aren't married, it isn't adultery [*phìtpràweenii*]." Morally, an individual's behavior only impacts that individual and so the moral concern is not so strongly shared by the group, though the behavior's impact on the social order is. Socially, an individual's behavior impacts others to the extent that the behavior causes suffering and affects the relationships between the individual and others. The effect it has on relationships (with parents, with teachers, with friends) is minimized by discretion and keeping up a good appearance.

A strong value on maintaining social harmony greatly impacts how students deal with sexual behavior. Ideally, because all their attention should be put into their studies, students should not form, and thus be distracted by, romantic relationships. Their education is an investment in the status of their family; most study as much for their parents as for themselves. As was mentioned, the reality is that a fair number of students do have *fìi*. Those who can maintain top grades with a boyfriend or girlfriend generate little discussion or criticism, as long as they get good grades and otherwise act fittingly. Students who appropriately handle extra-curricular activities (e.g., relationships, jobs, computer lessons) demonstrate maturity and an ability to handle multiple responsibilities. While I would not go so far as to suggest that students in romantic relationships are somehow more highly regarded than students who refrain from relationships, they are, I believe, admired for their ability to handle so much so well. Failure to

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth repeating that precepts are not commandments (such as the Ten Commandments of Christianity). The Ten Commandments were ordered by God based on his authority. Precepts are issued on advice; they are guidelines that one may make an effort to follow. Few laypersons claim to follow even the first five.

meet one's obligations as a son or daughter and student causes conflict, particularly with parents. But students who meet their obligations and act appropriately, cause little, if any conflict.

To understand sex, one must also understand social hierarchy, particularly patron-client relationships. The social roles of men and women are embedded in social relationships, which are in many contexts, gendered. For university students, their roles as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, are the most significant. In them, we see the patron-client dynamic: between parents and children, and between older siblings (*phîi*) and younger siblings (*nóøng*). Children have an obligation to their parents, called *bun khun*. Parents care for their children who later repay the obligation by providing for their parents. University students, because of the sacrifice many parents make for their educations and because of their potential to earn a good living, are embedded in this relationship of obligation. The *phîi-nóøng* relationship is especially relevant to understanding sex and gender, I think, for two reasons. First, it is the earliest peer relationship individuals experience, whether with actual blood siblings, cousins, or fictional kin. Second, it is the model for the husband-wife relationship. When spouses or lovers use kin terms, they use *phîi* and *nóøng*. And though this study did not study the *phîi-nóøng* relationship in depth, it is a topic I'd like to take up at some point in the future.

### **Implications for the Future**

University students migrate out of Mahasarakham to find work, often in Bangkok, or, if they become teachers wherever their assignment takes them. University educated people are not as easily exploited as other migrants and most will likely settle into career-track positions with the government or with private companies. Many will achieve a higher standard of living than other Isan people, and will have their own house, family, and modern conveniences. But their goals are not so different from other Isan migrants with whom they share some common traits. The students in this study plan to give back to their families, financially and in other ways. They plan to take care of their parents as much as they are able since their parents sacrificed for their

rearing and education. In the past this was mainly a responsibility of daughters, but sons at the university express nearly as strong a desire to repay their parents after graduation by taking care of their economic and material needs.

Although the data for this study are now 10 years old, the concepts described here do not appear to have changed much, a conclusion I base on more recent studies and my own ongoing dialogue with people in Mahasarakham. The introduction of new images and ideas about sex continues, challenging students to rethink their understandings of sex in general. Students are both advantaged and disadvantaged by this. Conflicting information sometimes forces them to choose sides (e.g., between Isan-ness and Bangkok-ness), but the choices and opportunities open to them are greater than for their parents. Education is a major route to economic security in an increasingly cash-based economy, and economic security is a route to choices. Newfound statuses, however, impact on family relationships, and consequently sex ideology, particularly as it related to gendered social roles.

SWU students have been enculturated to worldviews both rural and urban, Isan and Central Thai, educated and uneducated, traditional and modern, Thai and foreign. To what extent has the mixing of cultures affected the meanings of sex in Mahasarakham? There is no "key" to understanding the concept of *phêet* among university students in Mahsarakham. Although they are a fairly homogeneous group in terms of background and experiences, their constructions, interpretations, and applications of concepts and categories of *phêet* are amalgamations of a wide array of information from a variety of sources of cultural knowledge. To successfully *damnæn nay chiiwít* (proceed in life), they "read" all the cultural knowledge with which they are presented in their experience. They interpret it and apply it in social action in ways that minimize social conflict and maximize individual and familial gain.

The family remains a central concern for students, and their roles in it are the most important ones at this point in their lives. To make sense of the sexed world in a way that also

makes sense to others involves complex negotiation of meanings, at the foundation of which are their roles as student-sons, student-daughters, brothers, and sisters.

Research on the role of sexuality in family relationships is very much needed to understand the meanings of sex for Thai youth. These studies must be done among different groups in Thailand to allow for regional and other kinds of comparison. To facilitate comparison as well as in depth, experiential understandings, it seems highly desirable to utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in that research, particularly innovative methods (like the journals in this study) that might help to get at sensitive issues, such as female sexual behavior. Researchers might also consider heeding di Mauro's advice to consider that

Efforts to enact a more positive research agenda would significantly help to promote a much-needed view of sexuality not as a source of problems and risks but as a domain of well-being and human potential (di Mauro, 1997, p. 4)

Much sex research has been motivated by a need to address social or health problems. Research framed in this way cannot hardly help putting some informants/respondents on the defensive. In Thailand, and other cultures emphasizing "face-saving" and the importance of social harmony, approaching studies of sex and sexuality from a more positive orientation may result in greater cooperation, both in participation and in willingness to provide accurate information.