Introduction

Two waves of transnational migration, first from China to Thailand and then from Thailand to the United States, have played an important role in the formation of identity in three generations of diasporic Chinese Thai. In this book I focus on how cultural identities, seen through the lens of marriage, are constructed and acted out in Thailand and in the United States. I argue that there is no sex that is not already gendered, classed, or ethnicized, and that cultural identities are informed by regulations of sexuality. Sex, as much as gender or class, is central to understanding the formation of boundaries and cultural membership. Whether the individuals travel to or dwell in China, Thailand, or the United States, sexuality and gender remain salient for identity formation.

Diasporic Chinese are recognized as “people always in transit” (Ong 1999:2). I would add that among diasporic Chinese, men and women are transformed differently because they never stop negotiating with the ever-changing cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity. Flexible citizenship is accompanied by flexible sexual conduct, especially since sexuality serves as a key marker of diasporic masculinity and femininity.

What’s in a Name?

In Siam (as Thailand was called before 1939) only royal family members and appointed nobles used surnames. Five of Siam’s kings—Rama I (1782–1809), Rama II (1809–1824), Rama III (1824–1851), Rama IV (1851–1868), and Rama V (1868–1910)—used Chinese names to show their respect when making tribute payments to China (Kasian 1992:107). A Chinese name embodied a source of social capital that could be used to gain entrance into certain networks and access to valuable resources. However, the increasing presence of European colonialists in the mid-nineteenth
During the time of Rama V, hair worn in a braided queue was an important symbol of being Chinese. (By permission of the National Library, Bangkok.)

century destabilized the hierarchical relationship between China and Siam, and the value of having a Chinese name declined.

Ordinary Siamese began using family surnames in 1913 when King Rama VI (1910–1925) decided that the practice would help establish Siam as a “modern” state (Vella 1978:129). In 1939 Siam’s name was changed to Thailand, thereby emphasizing the Thai, one of the country’s particular ethnic groups. This marked the end of an era in which the monarchy had expressed its pride in ruling over a diverse ethnic population. While the old Siam had embraced all ethnic groups, the new name masked cultural, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity in the name of national uniformity.

In the 1940s Thailand’s regime requested that men and women assume first names “appropriate” to their gender. A man’s first name was to indicate masculine attributes such as strength and bravery; a woman’s, feminine characteristics such as beauty, fragrance, and gentleness. For example, General Somchit Chamanan changed his name from “Somchit,” meaning “fulfilled wish,” considered feminine, to “Kriengsak,” meaning “full of dignity” (Sumalee 1995:132). The creation of family surnames, the change in the country’s name, and the requirement for “gender appropriate” first names were all motivated by the dream of establishing a modern Thai identity.

The politics of names continues to play a key role in regulating Thai citizenship. According to the elderly Chinese I interviewed, early Chinese immigrants were required to add the prefix sae to their surname as an indi-
cator of Chinese-ness.\(^1\) Sae—the Teochiu word for “family name”—has been absorbed into the Thai language; it is used to emphatically single out those who are ethnic Chinese. Thai law states that Chinese immigrants who retain their Chinese nationality are “Chinese” (khonchin) or “Chinese with citizenship” (sanchat chin). From 1956 to 1972 the Household Registration Office classified Chinese immigrants who had changed their nationality and their Thailand-born children as “Thai with Thai nationality of Chinese ethnicity” (khonthai sanchat thai, chuachat chin); by the third generation, they were legally classified as Thai. But in practice these categories were full of ambiguity, the result of interethnic marriages, the constant manipulation of immigration laws, and the changing rules for citizenship.

Based upon official Thai government statistics, in 1989 there were only 254,777 Chinese in Thailand (Office of the Prime Minister 1990:85). But by 2002, according to the CIA’s World Factbook, ethnic Chinese made up about 14 percent (8.7 million) of Thailand’s total population (62.3 million) (World Factbook 2002). The size of the ethnic Chinese population in Thailand continues to be a much-debated demographic and political issue.\(^3\)

Throughout most of the twentieth century in Thailand, the category “Chinese” has been inscribed with negative meanings. One might avoid blatant discrimination in certain circumstances by becoming a Thai citizen, but adopting a Thai family name is a condition for acquiring citizenship. So the Chinese are caught between their need to change their citizenship and their desire to keep their Chinese surnames, which is, after all, a link between themselves and their ancestors. Changing surnames means abandoning one’s ancestors, who are thought to be watching over and protecting their descendants. Thai surnames do not carry the same kind of cultural meaning.

To overcome this dilemma, Chinese Thai invented Thai surnames that contained their Chinese surnames. First, they transcribed their Chinese surnames into the Chinese dialect they spoke rather than into Mandarin. For example, “Chen” in Mandarin became “Dang” in Teochiu, so that dialect-group identity was articulated. But since the Thai regime allows only those who share kinship relationships to share the same surname, thousands and thousands of Teochiu Chinese who had the same surname had to create a new family name. For example, one might add the term charoen (prosperity) to Dang. So what began as the Chinese surname Chen ended up being transformed into the Thai surname Dangcharoentham.

By doing this, individuals preserved their Chinese surnames within the Thai configuration. But so many Chinese Thai have done so that the long, hybrid names have themselves become indicators of Chinese-ness in Thailand.
When Chinese Thai Americans settled on the west coast of the United States, they confronted a landscape of identities very different from that they had experienced in Thailand. The Thai index of ethnic hierarchies had no significance in an American context. Many Americans knew nothing about Thailand, often confusing Thailand with Taiwan or mistaking Thai immigrants for “Indochinese refugees.” It was very rare for an American to read the hidden meanings of a hybrid Chinese Thai name, and as a practical matter Americans found these family names too hard to pronounce or too long to remember. Therefore many immigrants restored their Chinese family names—for example, using Dang in the United States, but Dangcharoen in the Thai American community and in Thailand. Thus, the name itself bears a transnational print: Dang originated from Chen but also departs from it.

Names are more than social markers. They can indicate power relationships between nation-states and subjects, and give a glimpse of how various social categories—such as Thai, Chinese, or American—are formed. Diasporic Chinese Thai often have both Thai and Chinese names, and some have English names as well. Some use a Chinese name at home and a Thai or an English name at school or work. Using names situationally expresses a flexible cultural identity and multiple belongings. It may also reflect the name-holder’s educational background and class status. To respect this practice, I have given the individuals whom I write about Thai, Chinese, or English pseudonyms based upon the name they used when first introduced to me.

In Thai society one important way to show respect is by addressing someone with the proper kinship term or professional title. I address people in the book just as I did in the field. I often address Chinese Thai men formally with Chinese appellations such as laoban (head of the business), jizhe (journalist), or xiansheng (Mr.). Some I addressed with Thai designations such as achan (professor or teacher) or thaokae (head of the business), a Teochiu Chinese term that has been integrated into the Thai language. I addressed only a few men with Chinese kinship terms such as bobo (elder uncle). In contrast, I commonly addressed many of the women as nainai (grandma), mama (mother), ayi (younger aunt), or jie (older sister), and occasionally I used a Thai kinship term such as pa (aunt). I also addressed one woman as xiaozhang (principal) and another as laoshi (teacher), their occupational titles in Chinese. The Thai kin term phi refers to men and women who are older than the speaker; and the designation khun is a respectful term corresponding to “Mr.” or “Mrs.” used before someone’s
name. It can be replaced by less neutral and more informal kinship terms; such fictive kinship relationships emphasize seniority and social status and help organize the flow of everyday life. Indeed, seemingly straightforward relationships often take place within a complex web of hierarchical systems.

Unlike those who speak Western languages, Thai speakers have multiple ways to say ‘I,’ each with particular resonances and connotations of deference, social status, intimacy, and formality, and similar interrelated factors (Voravudhi and Diller 1999:114). Self-reference in Thai is called kan wang tua, literally “the placing of self” or “speaking position” (ibid., 117). In addition, a junior man is required to use the term khrap at the end of a sentence to show his respect. A junior woman uses the term kha to show her respect. These terms, and most of the others used for self-reference, are gender-specific. Thus, names and linguistic conventions set the tone for the most basic components of Thai social life and Thai cultural identities.

Names can also move people closer to or further away from resources and privilege. One of Thailand’s top news stories in 1991 involved a very public confrontation between Supreme Commander General Sunthorn Kongsompong, his wife, and his mistress. The mistress, Ampapan, a former nurse, told journalists that she claimed the right to use the general’s family name, Kongsompong. It was unprecedented for a mistress to use the media to confront a lawful wife. Ampapan said, “I felt as if I had had a previous relationship with this man, that we used to live together. . . . I knew that very second that I would eventually be this man’s wife” (Sanitsuda 1991). She portrayed her relationship with General Kongsompong as natural and inevitable, a result of the karma she and the general had accumulated from a past life together.3

The public and the press referred to Ampapan as the general’s mianoi (minor wife). This term has negative social connotations, for in Thai society a woman who lives with a married man other than her husband is often referred to as his minor wife regardless of her marital status. To complicate matters, in some cases the “major wife,” mialuang, may never have legally registered her marriage, having had a ceremonial marriage instead. Therefore, I often use the term polygyny in this study as it is defined by local discourse and practice rather than by the law.

To counter the negative category “minor wife,” Ampapan described herself as the genuine “mother of the house” (maeban), who took care of every aspect of the general’s well-being, from selecting his toothpaste to choosing his clothes; she said she wanted nothing more than the chance to
“serve” the general legally (ibid.). In crafting this public image of herself, she minimized the significance of any economic advantages that she gained from her relationship with the general. According to the media, however, this former nurse was now a land developer “embarking on a golf-course project covering more than 4,500 rai” (180 acres) (ibid.).

The general’s legal wife, Khunying Orachorn, an elite-class woman whose honorific title “khunying” had been conferred by the Thai royal family, had no choice but to respond to this public challenge. She filed a lawsuit to prohibit Ampapan from using her husband’s family name. Like Ampapan, Khunying Orachorn portrayed herself as a “good” woman: she responded to her husband’s affair with wifely virtue, by “tolerating,” “keeping silent,” and “letting things pass by” (ibid.). This stance gained her considerable public support. Newspapers quoted readers who applauded her with such comments as “Good, this will teach the mianoi her place” (ibid.).

However, Ampapan had asked the general’s mother to adopt her so that she could use the general’s prominent family name. In the end the court ruled that Khunying Orachorn did not have the right to monopolize the general’s family name, thereby supporting the general and implicitly validating polygyny. Khunying Orachorn, who had conceived of herself as a defender of legality, found herself defeated by the judicial system.

The general himself was noticeably absent from the heated media discourse. His power conferred on him the privilege of remaining silent throughout the controversy. However, the actions of his two wives did influence the public’s perception of him. A local Chinese newspaper titled one report: “It is easy for the general to play politics, but it is difficult for him to play with his women” (zhengzhi yigao, nüren nanwan [M]) (World News Daily, 24 June 1991).

This episode took place while I was conducting fieldwork on how marriage shapes the ongoing construction of ethnic Chinese cultural identities in contemporary Bangkok. I was particularly interested in how various constructions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class—the stuff of identity—conflated at the site of marriage, and this event allowed me to observe firsthand how local gender ideologies influenced the ways in which many upper- and middle-class Chinese Thai identified themselves. Because this confrontation took place over a period of months in such a public forum—indeed, it became a sort of soap opera—people from every walk of life avidly followed its twists and turns and readily expressed their opinions on it; diverse attitudes towards marriage, sexuality, and ethnic differences all bubbled to the surface.
What struck me was how class status and gender politics affected the process of defining and rejecting others, and how men’s collective sexual privilege was taken for granted. Like most Thai men, many middle-class Chinese Thai men regarded the general’s sexual privilege simply as a demonstration of a “man’s nature” (pen thama chat khong pbuchai/nanren de tainxing [M]), the result of essentialized biological differences between men and women. At the same time, the Chinese Thai men usually described themselves as “responsible” (khuam rappitchop/fuze [M]) family men, in contrast to “irresponsible” working-class Thai men who “lay eggs” everywhere, but do not support the family. From this perspective, while both Thai and Chinese Thai men might lay eggs outside the home, being a successful breadwinner—a key symbol of middle-class respectability—delineated the boundary between Chinese and Thai. However, because of the general’s elite-class status and his clear ability to support his dependents, the Chinese Thai men focused on his inability to maintain “peace” between his wives. Some commented that the Chinese kept the peace between their wives much better than the general did. Several, for example, mentioned Teko, a celebrated lukchin polygynist whose seven wives and nearly two dozen children lived “harmoniously” under one roof; furthermore, Teko and all his wives worked together at a family-owned meatball factory. Through the process of ethnicizing along class lines, middle-class Chinese Thai men articulate their class respectability by emphasizing their sexual privilege, their breadwinner role, and their ability to maintain family harmony.

The Chinese Thai women were more interested in Ampapan and Khunying Orachorn and focused their criticism on Ampapan rather than the general. Ampapan was denounced as being “worse” than a sex worker for having “stolen” another woman’s husband. One elderly woman, my neighbor in Bangkok, praised Khunying Orachorn for her tolerance, saying she was “like us Chinese” (xiang women zhongguo ren [M]). Many women supported the elite-class major wife while condemning Ampapan for “not knowing her own social status” (mairu thana/buzhi gaodi [M]).

Chinese Thai men and women were interpreting the conflicts in the story of the general and his wives in gendered and class-specific ways. The men focused on the general’s inability to maintain family harmony instead of on his economic responsibility; the women focused on the necessity of tolerating male sexual privilege and on hierarchies between wives. To borrow Stuart Hall’s remark, they spoke “from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific.” What they said was “always...
‘in context’, positioned” (1990:222). Similarly, my attempts to understand unfamiliar combinations of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class were shaped by the nature of my relations with the people I interviewed, by current academic discourse, and, of course, by my own culture-bound modes of thinking.

Just as individual identity comes from a specific position within a power structure, names and labels are also located within cultural systems and power structures; they are tied to an individual’s gender, ethnicity, class, cultural identity, citizenship, and access to socioeconomic resources. I have named this book *Marital Acts* because it locates marriage as a site for exploring different ways that identities are constructed and acted out in the interactions between sexuality, gender, class, and ethnicity or race. The notion of acts refers not only to national and cultural forms of (self) regulation or discipline—the various guises of governmentality—but also to *practices*—negotiation, play, and disguises. I hold that it is impossible to understand identity unless the processes of discipline and self-identification are examined. I want to avoid treating transnationalism abstractly, as a collection of dematerialized cultural flows. Instead, I pay special attention to everyday practices when examining how identities work, and how and why they change in certain ways.

*Three Generations:*  
*Chinkao, Lukchin, and Chinese Thai Americans*

The book is organized into four parts. Part I (chapters 1–2) provides an introduction and illustrates various class, gender, ethnic, generational, individual, and theoretical positions in this book. Part II (chapters 3–5) focuses on the chinkao, the China-born first generation, while Part III (chapters 6–9) deals with the lukchin, or Thailand-born second generation. Throughout Parts II and III, I use three key themes—kinship, the division of labor, and conjugal sex—to characterize everyday practices and contextualize identity formation. Part IV, the conclusion, examines how particular aspects of the culture brought over from Thailand, as well as American culture and identity politics, inform the ongoing cultural struggle of Chinese Thai Americans.

Most chinkao in this project were born in southeastern coastal China, in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, and came to Thailand via steamship in the 1930s and 1940s. While the immigrants included speakers of five Chinese dialects—Teochiu, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, and
Hokkiense—Teochiu-speakers were the most prominent. After arriving in the new land, chinkao were confronted with an emerging Thai nationalist movement, followed by an anti-communist campaign during which some chinkao and lukchin were accused of working on behalf of communist China. Diplomatic relations between Thailand and China were suspended from 1949 until 1975, during which time most chinkao were cut off from their family members in China—some for as long as twenty-six years. In addition to encountering displacement and marginalization in Thailand, chinkao also had to contend with China’s antagonistic policies toward “overseas Chinese” (haiwai huaren [M]) at that time. The houses and land that some had purchased for retirement back in China were confiscated during the Land Reform movement in the early 1950s, and some had relatives who were persecuted as “spies” during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) simply for having received remittances or parcels from Thailand. Overseas Chinese were openly scorned as the bourgeoisie, and thus a threat to socialist China.

Under these conditions some chinkao began referring to themselves not as overseas Chinese but as “overseas orphans” (haiwai guer [M]). Eventually, as they involved themselves more deeply in Thailand’s economy and ethnic politics, they became aware of growing differences between themselves and the Chinese in China. Gradually they switched from renting to buying houses in Thailand. The shift from sojourner to dweller—from migrant to immigrant—was based on personal choices, but those choices were strongly influenced by the policies of the Thai and Chinese regimes toward the ethnic Chinese.

Chapter 3 explains that most men came to Thailand as labor migrants, whereas women usually came because of marriage or family reunification. The dialectical relationship between immigration and marital practices reveals that immigration is both an economic endeavor and a complex process of cultural reproduction in which Thai and Chinese regimes compete. Chapter 4 demonstrates how Chinese identity is characterized by masculinized economic production and feminized reproduction. Chinkao women transformed much faster than men in the work domain. With greater access to labor markets in Bangkok, chinkao women can add an income-producing job to the unpaid work of housekeeping and childcare. Nevertheless, their economic upward mobility and choice of occupation are still heavily influenced by family gender politics. Chapter 5 analyzes how chinkao men conform to the Chinese ideal of masculinity—to be a reliable breadwinner—while embracing aspects of the Thai ideal of masculinity—
especially the notion of being a virile womanizer. Thus, these transformations among chinkao — men changing their sexual behavior and women transforming their work behavior — characterize their gender-specific ways of belonging in Thailand and China. This reworking of feminine and masculine identities constitutes a central part of the cultural struggle within transnational space.6

Part III—especially chapter 6—focuses on the hybrid character of lukchin identity. By examining three weddings, chapter 7 further illustrates how Thai “modernity” (thansamai) and lukchin hybrid identities are expressed in class taste and ethnic identities. Born, raised, educated, and dwelling in Thailand, lukchin have experienced a different set of regulations than their chinkao parents and have been exposed to many more aspects of Thai and Western culture. Most have learned about Chinese culture only from the stories told by their parents and from their own experiences living in Thai society. When they identify themselves as Chinese, khonchin, they often distinguish between the Chinese in Thailand and the Chinese in China. At the same time, they are keenly aware that they differ from “real Thai” (thaithae) in the eyes of the state. For this reason, when I refer to ethnic Chinese in Thailand, I frequently use the term “Chinese Thai” to distinguish them from the mainland Chinese and to capture their transnational experience. I do not use “Sino-Thai” because this expression has been used to refer to the descendants of Chinese immigrants who married Thai spouses and to the relationship between China and Thailand. When referring to the Chinese Thai in Thailand and in the United States, I use the term “diasporic Chinese Thai.” At the same time I also use “Chinese,” “ethnic Chinese,” “chinkao,” “lukchin,” and “Chinese Thai Americans” in various contexts to convey a sense of differences, transformation, ambiguity, and fluidity. I hope this will help convey the idea that cultural identities are socially constructed and malleable, not fixed states from which a “natural” essence is expressed in a set of distinctive attributes.

In the struggle to be accepted as Thai or to resist being discriminated against as Chinese, lukchin became conscious of the need to act “Thai.” They learned to mimic a perfect Central Thai accent and imitate Thai body language. Particular Thai gestures, such as lowering the body or showing respect through hand movements (wai), became ways of expressing their sensitivity to the Thai social hierarchy. Some also spoke English in order to dilute or disguise their Chinese-ness.

The majority of chinkao and lukchin whom I met had moved from peasant or working class to middle or upper class.7 Their socioeconomic
upward mobility is similar to that of the ethnic Chinese in other parts of Southeast Asia and has been coincident with expanding business opportunities, an early advantage in business (Mackie 1992a:163), and the development of commercial production in Thailand “as colonialism and market forces integrated indigenous economies into the world market system” (Lim 1983:6).

However, the changes engendered by socioeconomic upward mobility are not necessarily “progressive.” Accumulated economic capital has enabled some lukchin men to express certain cultural beliefs that chinkao men could not afford to practice: male inheritance and patrilocality (a married couple lives with the groom’s natal family) are more prevalent among lukchin than among chinkao. Some lukchin men no longer think like their fathers that Thai women are “sexier,” but assert, because of sexual encounters with newly arrived undocumented Chinese immigrant women, that “Chinese women are tastier.” An old Chinese metaphor that compares women with wild or domestic flowers has been replaced with a Thai metaphor that compares women with different flavors of hot sauce. It is said that “repeatedly tasting the same hot sauce causes a man to lose his appetite” (kin nambrik tbaatkao kboa k'o bua). Within the contemporary construction of Thai masculinity, fidelity to one’s wife is not a crucial indicator of being masculine. Indeed, the sexual discipline that a man experiences is to be a “womanizer” (chauchu), not a faithful husband. Unlike his wife, he is not limited to having sex only within the marriage. In other words, the particular masculine constraints that a lukchin man experiences are often obscured by his sexual privilege as a man in Thai society.

Chapter 8 explores the effects of naturalization on conjugal sexuality and middle-class respectability. A lukchin man can boast about his extramarital affairs to express his masculine identity and middle-class respectability. In contrast, to be an active sexual agent would call into question a lukchin woman’s middle-class respectability and feminine identity. As a consequence, men and women who had extramarital affairs talked about them and managed them differently. Gender-specific practices also profoundly influence the operation of a family business, the theme of chapter 9. I pay special attention to female entrepreneurs, conjugal sexuality, and emotional management, topics generally neglected in the study of Chinese family businesses in Southeast Asia. I argue that a businessman’s structural privileges, embedded in kinship and the sexual domain, not only serve to disguise an exploitative conjugal labor relationship but also enable him to claim his wife’s accomplishments as his own.
Chapter 10 examines how Chinese Thai Americans experience different regulations than chinkao and lukchin with regard to sexuality, citizenship, and ethnicity. In an unexpected gender-specific twist, Chinese Thai American women have begun asserting their sexual freedom, and men have had to restrain their previous womanizing. For many Chinese Thai American men, patronizing the sex industry or marrying more than one woman no longer demonstrates masculinity. Instead, monogamy becomes the ideal, and masculinity now tends to be measured by success in acquiring material goods. Nonetheless, monogamy does not necessarily mean gender equality.

The previously meaningful social categories “Thai” and “Chinese” are often lumped together as “Asian American” or “people of color” in the United States. When discussing identity politics in the United States, the term “race” must be added to the mix. Chinese Thai experiences of racial discrimination in the United States often evoke memories of discrimination encountered in Thailand. A few who had rejected their Chinese identity in Thailand are now reclaiming it, but it would be a mistake to read this as a rejection of Thai cultural identity. On the contrary, most Chinese Thai Americans are proud of being Thai, an identity they have embraced since childhood. Being forced to rethink identity politics as a result of transnational migration and displacement, they are deeply engaged in three distinct yet related cultural practices: they claim Thai-ness, they claim American-ness, and they create accounts of Chinese and Thai ethnicity that use their specific cultures and histories to challenge preconceptions of what it means to be Thai, Chinese, and American.

Generational differences have to be understood in relation to different cultural and socioeconomic systems, but generational boundaries were not always clear-cut. Some lukchin were older than some chinkao, having been born long before the chinkao immigrated to Thailand. If we focus exclusively on generational distinctions, we risk overlooking the complexity within a generation, because we can easily ascribe a certain level of artificial homogeneity to a group for whom other distinctions, such as gender and class, may have much greater meaning. Therefore, I pay attention to differences and similarities within generations as well as between them, in order to understand them both horizontally and vertically. The juxtaposition of these three generations illustrates how the formation of cultural identity is an ongoing process, taking place not only between generations but also within each one as well.