

Introduction

There is no such thing as The Prostitute; there are only competing versions of prostitution. The Prostitute is an invention of policy-makers, researchers, moral crusaders, and political activists ... The Prostitute functions as a “magic sign” whose meaning always exceeds its definition.

– Wendy Chapkis

“The Prostitute” has made frequent appearances on the world stage over the course of the last century and a half, but nowhere has she been a more enduring image than in post-1960s Thailand. As the go-go bars and “hired wives” for American servicemen during the Vietnam War transmogrified into an international sex industry centred in Bangkok, the Thai prostitute has become a powerful international symbol, signalling, *inter alia*, the economic and moral decline of the so-called Third World, the international sexual and economic exploitation of Third World women, the fantasies of international business and leisure, and the nightmare of neo-imperialism. All of these have drawn on the symbolic force of The Prostitute, although none can be said to represent a singular “reality” pertaining to actual women involved in prostitution. It is the symbolic force of The Prostitute that has drawn my attention to the discursive construction of prostitution as part of the international politics of representation. In particular, it has been the raised voices of women from non-Western¹ nations asking for attention to be paid to the ways in which non-Western women are represented – not merely as an issue of image, but also as a fundamental issue of power. Underlying the discomfort of Thais, both women and men, with the international discussions of the “Thai prostitution problem” is a plea for an understanding of how important Western discursive dominance is in shaping politics in non-Western countries such as Thailand. Because of the way gender and sexuality have been invoked in both imperialist and nationalist constructions of cultural identities, prostitution is a particularly sensitive area of discussion in this regard. In this study, therefore, I examine prostitution policy in Thailand as the product of debates over gender and national identity within the context of Western hegemony.

Prostitution in Thailand has garnered a great deal of international attention over the past two decades, with the seeming explosion of sex-related industries. The sex-tourism industry has most recently been eclipsed in the international spotlight by the growing awareness of the numbers of women (from Thailand as well as other poor countries) working in the prostitution

industries of Europe, North America, and Japan. Pundits point to the “Asian cultural tradition” of dutiful daughters to explain this phenomenon, rarely questioning either the developed world’s own complicity in the political economy of the region or Western men’s demand for cheap, exotic sexual pleasure. Thai prostitute women appear either as innocent victims of a cruel cultural tradition or as heartless gold-diggers – in a repetition of the West’s cultural stereotypes of prostitute women. (Not incidentally, Thai men appear as sexually rapacious and/or politically and morally corrupt.) These representations of Thai women and Thai culture have raised numerous protests from both the Thai government and Thai citizens who recognize in these characterizations the familiar strains of cultural imperialism – the differentiation and hierarchization of cultures that enables political and economic dominance – portraying Thailand as “backward,” “debauched,” and “primitive” and as incapable of Western “civilization.”

Similarly, there have been numerous studies of prostitution in Thailand in recent years. Most have emphasized the interests of the Thai state and capitalist class in maintaining prostitution, particularly tourism-oriented prostitution, as a profitable enterprise for men and for capital. Alternatively, prostitution has been viewed as the product of an unchanging and uniform Buddhist-based culture that relegates women to secondary status. In this argument, women lack merit – the basis of rebirth into a state of Enlightenment – and are a source of pollution, even as they are deemed responsible for the maintenance of the family. On the whole, these studies view the Thai state and culture, particularly Buddhism, as unchanging and monolithic entities, and they view the interests of capital as unchallenged. Such studies fail to capture the changes and challenges to prostitution policy, and gender relations generally, that have occurred over the years. The result has been a growing resentment in Thailand of the failure of foreign academics and media to portray “what we’re doing about it.”² This complaint echoes postcolonial critiques of the portrayals of the Third World as inert and unchanging (without an infusion of Western impetus) and as less developed and less capable than Western states. Chandra Mohanty’s classic study “Under Western Eyes” has clearly outlined the ways in which Western studies of Third World women tend to essentialize them in a way that deprives them of agency in the eyes of the West and that reasserts Western superiority.³

This debate leads us to recognize the fundamental importance of representation as part of the international power struggle between what are tellingly referred to as the First World and the Third World. The representational, or discursive, power of the West is salient with regard to the daily politics of countries such as Thailand. How Thailand is represented on the world stage is an issue of everyday discussion that plays out in national politics, particularly around the issue of prostitution. Within this context,

prostitution policy becomes a forum for debates over national identity and foreign image, over who Thais are and how the world perceives them. How the Prostitute is constructed in Thai politics, therefore, reflects these concerns as much as it does economic interest or cultural predispositions. The debates around prostitution policy are a forum for the construction of national identity in the face of Western cultural imperialism.

Sex and Borders, therefore, addresses the issue of prostitution in Thailand not as a study of the whys and hows of the prostitution industry that has made Thailand (in)famous as “the world’s biggest brothel” but, rather, as a study of the political discussion of and response to prostitution as a window onto the link between gender and national identity. In other words, rather than looking at how economics, relations between given men and women, or Thai culture have contributed to the growth in prostitution over the years, this book examines how the prostitution problem is conceptualized and how that conceptualization is linked to constructions of gender (masculinity and femininity) and national identity in a globalized world. In this way it shows how, over the years, prostitution policy has been shaped by an attempt to construct and to maintain a national identity.

In particular, the debate over prostitution policy in Thailand is a debate over women’s bodies, which are seen as markers of national boundaries that are to be controlled by the state. In today’s Thailand, the debate over prostitution involves a struggle over modernity and tradition, over masculinity and femininity, over the role of the state and the identity of the nation. In this era of globalization, as in the era of imperialism, states have responded with both resistance and acquiescence to global pressures and influences. These global pressures have not been simply economic or military but also discursive. Prostitution policy, as the site of the creation of the gender and sexual identities that undergird national identity, is shaped by the need to respond to Western representational power. Today, for instance, prostitution policy is guided by the desire of the Thai middle class to shape Thailand into both a modern state (as represented by the masculinity of the men who govern it) and a traditional nation (as represented by Thai women). In other words, prostitution policy seeks to discipline women, to regulate women’s bodies, and to see that they occupy the “correct” cultural roles (e.g., mothers to the nation). In the particular history of the formation of Thai national identity, prostitute women have come to be interpreted as unable to control their own futures. In the discourse of the Thai middle class, prostitute women are icons of the decline of tradition and the (negative) result of a rush to modernity without the proper guidance of their “betters.” In this way prostitutes’ own voices and demands have been drowned out in the modern Thai polity, and these women have become the objects of policy rather than the subjects of politics.

By viewing the Prostitute, as well as gender and culture, as constructed categories, we begin to open up the possibilities of agency – of resistance and challenge. In this way we also begin to understand how those possibilities are made invisible by particular discursive renderings of identities; that is, rather than assuming that prostitute women are silent, or victims, or greedy consumers, we must assume that there is nothing essential about them at all and that the identities and modifiers given to them are, in fact, historical constructions imposed through power. Second, in order to understand how the Prostitute is constructed we need to examine the universe of political discourse in Thailand that produces this phenomenon. I view this universe as an arena of sense making within which various discourses are taken up by political actors who contend for hegemonic appeal. Third, in Thailand this universe is fundamentally shaped by the struggle between international/Western representations and Thailand's self-construction of national identity. And, fourth, because of the links between constructions of national identity, gender identity, and sexual behaviour, constructions of the Prostitute (and, by extension, prostitution policy) are informed by these discourses over national and gender identity.

Thus, I examine prostitution policy as a discursive terrain, one in which gender and national identities are produced and regulated. I argue that prostitution policy in Thailand is fundamentally shaped by concerns over gender and national identity; that is, I look at culture as continually constructed through operations of power rather than as a given. In particular, I look at that aspect of culture known as national identity as being constructed against imperialist representations of other cultures. Similarly, I look at gender as a construction imposed upon the fluctuating realities of sexed bodies – a construction that is interdependent with that of national identity. Constructions of gender have been central mechanisms of constructing national and imperialist identities. The Prostitute is a particular form of gender construction – a category with no inherent meaning but with a great deal of discursive power in the modern world because it is the dividing line between good (i.e., acceptable) women and bad (i.e., unacceptable) women.

Prostitution in Thailand

While historians have identified various forms of what may be called prostitution even in the ancient kingdoms that pre-dated Siam/Thailand, it was only with the Vietnam War that the numbers of women involved became an issue of wide public concern. Ever since then, despite the long history of prostitution in Thailand, prostitution has been strongly associated with the forces of globalization and modernization, and, despite the fact that most clients of Thai prostitutes are Thai, there has been a tendency to focus on the international aspects of the trade (foreign tourists and international

trafficking). The usual story of “the prostitution problem in Thailand” – told by academics, feminists, and journalists both inside and outside Thailand – points to the Vietnam War and the stationing of thousands of American troops in Thailand as the beginning of wide-scale prostitution in that country. Women, mainly from the poorer province of Isan in the northeast and from the northern province of Chiang Mai, began to migrate to the areas outside American air bases in Thailand as well as to the urban centres where soldiers were taken for rest and recreation (R&R) leave. These women were to provide sexual services in the mushrooming bars, discos, and massage parlours built to cater to the military and, increasingly during the 1970s and 1980s, to tourists. With the declining terms of trade in the rural areas brought on by export-led industrialization policies, which drained resources away from the countryside and into the urban areas, women’s responsibility to provide for their families led more and more rural daughters to seek work in the new sex industry. Police reports estimated that the number of “persons clearly engaged in prostitution related activity” stood at 171,000 by 1964 (in the early stages of American deployment in Southeast Asia).⁴ The closest approximation in the late 1950s, from much less thorough reports, was that approximately 20,000 people (mainly female) were involved.⁵ The perception of rapidly rising prostitution numbers was highlighted by the number of women who were involved in the newly classified activity of “special service”; that is, working in the bars and entertainment districts. Here police estimated that there were some 426,908 “special service girls” in Thailand in 1964.⁶ Even as American military forces pulled out of Vietnam in the early 1970s, prostitution continued to grow in Thailand as tourism agencies picked up where the military left off.

The growth of the prostitution-tourism industry in Thailand has been the focus of a great deal of critical inquiry. Thahn-dam Truong’s 1990 study of tourism and prostitution in Thailand clearly laid out the interaction of local and global capital and patriarchy in structuring and maintaining this profitable industry.⁷ Indeed, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s the prostitution industry continued to expand even as feminists and human rights activists in Thailand, Europe, and North America organized against sex tourism, demanding that governments and international organizations address the continued sexual exploitation of Third World women by Western men.

Feminist analysts pointed to patriarchal structures in Thai society – the role of the dutiful daughter in maintaining family income and religious teachings that placed women below men in the social hierarchy – along with regional poverty as the driving factors behind women’s entry into the trade. Even as Thailand experienced its boom in the 1980s and early 1990s through the rapid growth of export industries, the impoverishment of its countryside continued to deepen. While rural poverty was three times greater than urban poverty in the 1970s, it was five times greater in the

1980s. This poverty was concentrated in the north and northeast (Isan) provinces and manifested itself particularly among women, the uneducated, and the aged.⁸ Since the majority of women were employed in the rural agricultural sector they were the ones who were most hurt by the rapid decline of agriculture as a contributor to the gross domestic product (GDP) (it went from 25.4 percent in 1980 to 12.8 percent in 1990).⁹ Soon more women than men migrated from the countryside to Bangkok, only to find poorly paid and exploitative work in the export factories or even more demeaning work in domestic service. Work in prostitution, however, could provide an income twenty-five times greater than the median level of other occupations in which migrant women found themselves.¹⁰ While regional and gender-based poverty explained the supply side of prostitution, feminists also pointed to the structuring of the demand for prostitution as a product of the interplay of patriarchy and political economy. In particular, they noted that government encouragement of the prostitution and tourism industries, along with the racist and sexist attitudes of Western men and governments, fuelled the demand for tourism-prostitution services. Not only were explicit sex tours being organized by international tourism agencies, but government tourism promotion also drew upon the sexualized image of Thai women to boost tourism numbers.

Reports of slavery-like conditions in the brothels and bars of Thailand intensified the investigations of national and international human rights and women's organizations in the 1980s. The deaths of several women, who were unable to escape a fire in a brothel in southern Thailand in 1984, generated further concern about the abuse of women in prostitution. Continuing reports of inhumane conditions, the buying and selling of women, the practice of indebting women or tricking them into prostitution, and outright abuse confirmed a general picture of the "sex slavery" that appeared to be rife in Thailand.

The industry also took on new forms in the 1980s. From traditional brothels and commercially organized sex tours – plane-loads of men from Japan, the Middle East, Europe, and North America arriving in Thailand – the trade expanded to include a reverse "traffic in women," with thousands of young women from Thailand and other developing countries opting, or being forced into, travelling overseas to work in the prostitution industries of the more developed countries. Even if some women knew that they would be working in prostitution once they arrived overseas, few were aware of the kinds of conditions they would face – conditions that included being controlled by the traffickers, or venue owners, who would demand repayment for all costs incurred in travel and housing, often preventing flight by holding on to the women's passports and documents. Often working illegally in an underground trade in a foreign country, women working in prostitution overseas had little recourse against abuse.

Adding further worry was the AIDS threat. HIV-positive rates reached proportions of 41 percent to 54 percent among commercial sex workers in brothels in the northern provinces in the early 1990s, and they reached a median prevalence of 24 percent among brothel prostitutes nationwide.¹¹ In 1993, the government reported that approximately 450,000 Thais were infected with HIV.¹² The threat of AIDS turned attention to the prevalence of prostitution use among the local male population. Reports of 88 percent or 90 percent of Thai men having visited a prostitute at least once in their lifetime made national and international news.

Children's rights organizations became increasingly involved over the course of the 1980s as information on the industry's use of very young children as virtual sex slaves began to come forward. Reports of poverty-stricken rural families selling their children into sex slavery in Bangkok became standard fare in the late 1980s. The growing threat of AIDS also contributed to an increased demand for younger children in the trade as people believed that young children were less likely to be infected. In 1991 the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights in Thailand reported that some 800,000 of an estimated two million persons providing sexual services in Thailand were children under the age of eighteen. While many analysts agree that the more likely number of people working in the industry as commercial sex workers is well under one million, the 1991 report indicated that there was a growing perception that the industry had spread to critical proportions.

Of further concern, though less frequently discussed in the press, was the number of migrant and indigenous hill-tribe women involved in the trade. While no exact numbers are available, the impoverishment of hill-tribe villagers has led hill-tribe women, like their rural lowland counterparts, to migrate to the cities in search of work, including work in the prostitution industry. Alternatively, tourists and "trekkers" are found in growing numbers in the distant hill villages offering money in exchange for sexual relations, and brokers are travelling to the villages in search of AIDS-free women for the urban prostitution trade.¹³ Not only were the peripheralized hill tribes being drawn into the trade, but, over the course of the 1990s, analysts also noted increasing numbers of foreign women – particularly Burmese (including Burmese hill-tribe) and Chinese women – working in the Thai sex industry. This again raised the spectre of forced trafficking and dire economic circumstances as the underlying causes of women's entry into the trade.

However, it was also increasingly clear that the nature of the problem was very differently understood by various groups. Under international and national pressure to do something about the prostitution problem the Thai government, to much fanfare, adopted new legislation in 1996, increasing the penalties for procurers and brothel owners as well as punishing clients

of underage prostitutes and parents who sold their children into prostitution. While the new legislation was greeted with enthusiasm by international organizations that viewed prostitution itself as a human rights abuse to be prevented at all costs, a number of women's organizations quickly remarked on the failure to remove penalties for prostitute women themselves. It was the illegality of prostitution, many argued, that led to abuse – by police, clients, pimps, and procurers. As long as prostitutes were themselves penalized, women had no possibility for redress, having to remain out of the reach of the law. The drive to “correct” the prostitution problem may have contributed to the continued abuse of prostitute women, and the overall understanding of women as “victims” in the trade may have contributed to patronizing and disempowering policies.

Therefore, I seek to understand how these policies have come about by more closely interrogating the story of prostitution. In reality, we know very little about the prostitution industry itself in Thailand. A great deal of activity takes place in roadside brothels and in more unstructured arrangements that involve hair-dressers, golf caddies (in Thailand these are mostly women), and waitresses. The conditions of work vary widely, as do the people involved. How, then, do certain, often simplified, representations of a complex reality come to dominate the public consciousness or, perhaps more important, the consciousness of elites and policy makers? Where do these representations come from and what are their implications? These are the questions that this book seeks to address.

Prostitution, Representation, and Power

The theoretical underpinnings of this book are drawn from social constructionist and postcolonial schools of thought. The constructed nature of the categories “prostitution/prostitute” has been made clear in feminist debates as well as in the history of the terms themselves. Prostitution is a highly elastic category. For this reason, debates among social scientists about what actually constitutes prostitution continue. Even the vague definition of prostitution as “the exchange of sexual services for material gain” is easily challenged. Consider, for instance, that actresses in seventeenth-century England were considered whores and that, in 1988, when a dominatrix was charged with keeping a bawdy house, courts in Toronto were preoccupied with determining whether “spanking is sex.”¹⁴ Similarly, in studying Thailand, Eric Cohen questions whether women who act as girlfriends to tourists during their stay in return for gifts can be included under the rubric of prostitution; others problematize categorizing women who were hired wives during the Vietnam War as prostitutes.¹⁵ In most countries the definitional niceties (or lack thereof) are left to the police, who use their “common sense” to determine who is or is not a prostitute. They also decide at what particular moment and in what particular place

a woman becomes a prostitute. The very flexibility of the category prostitution should alert us to the tenuousness of the link between reality and representation. Indeed, the feminist attempt to challenge masculinist representations of prostitution (e.g., as being functional to male sexual needs) by presenting a “truth” founded upon women’s experience of prostitution (e.g., as being exploitative) foundered when analysts could not uncover a common experience. Prostitutes’ rights activists have argued that prostitution is “just another job,” while others, including former prostitutes, have organized against prostitution, characterizing it as a “degrading and dehumanizing” experience. Perhaps even more important, as organizers and activists turned their sights from First World to Third World prostitution, the problems of applying simplified notions of prostitution (as either a freely chosen occupation or a form of slavery) became increasingly clear.

While the structural constraints surrounding prostitution as a choice appear most glaring in the developing world, one cannot leap to the assumption that prostitutes in the Third World are without sexual or social agency. As Kemala Kempadoo has recently argued, despite the understandable reluctance to explore agency in prostitution in the Third World, and given the general over-sexualization of non-Western women (and the resulting histories of rape and abuse),

in an era when women can no longer be defined exclusively as victims, where Third World women speak for themselves in various forums, where increasingly analyses have shifted focus from simple hierarchies and dichotomies to the problematization of multiple spaces, seemingly contradictory social locations and plural sites of power, it would seem that experiences, identities and struggles of women in the global sex industry cannot be neglected.¹⁶

In *Sex and Borders* I assume that there is neither any singular or generalizable experience of prostitution nor any singular prostitute; rather I view “the prostitute” as a subject-position constructed in discourse and imposed upon a shifting reality. I consider it important to approach the issue from this angle in order to address prostitute women’s own concerns about the discursive power of the “whore stigma” and to recognize that women in prostitution in Thailand, as elsewhere, are aware of their own multiple subjectivity, of their simultaneous powerlessness and agency.¹⁷ In taking this approach I draw upon the work of poststructuralist feminist theorists who uncover the ways in which female bodies are interpolated as women – including, for example, as victims or whores – and how this process constrains and structures their lives. From this perspective, the construction of the category “prostitute” is one of the forces that shape the lives and experiences of women, and it does so by delineating the boundaries

of proper and improper female behaviour and seeking to penalize and/or regulate those who fall into the latter category. As Wendy Chapkis' opening epigraph makes clear, the regulatory function of the category "prostitute" makes its actual content highly variable rather than a simple correspondence between an embodied activity and an abstract label. Again, this is not to say that there are no women selling sex, no actual women engaged in the commercial-sex business; rather, it is to argue against a necessary experience, or reality, arising from this activity and to focus our attention on how, to paraphrase Denise Riley, actual women working in the industry are positioned as prostitutes.¹⁸ Throughout I argue that law and policy are determined by, and reproduce, how prostitutes are seen and understood; that is, how they are positioned. Thus, we need to ask how prostitute women in Thailand come to be positioned as victims, or consumers, or backward peasants, and we need to examine the implications of such positionings.

My concern here with representation and the discursive constructions of prostitution is not simply theoretical. Indeed, it is feminists from the Third World – both scholars and those organizing around issues such as prostitution – who have called attention to the power of representation. It is my contention, therefore, that the struggle over the power of representation is a real and fundamental part of actual, everyday international and national politics. The theoretical insights of the postcolonial school into the power of discourse in shaping relations between North and South, the colonizer and the colonized, are made manifest in the protestations over how Thailand and Thai women are portrayed in the international debate over prostitution. Feminists from Thailand have been very sensitive to the need both to recognize Thai women's weak position within the global economy and to avoid presenting Thai women in prostitution as mere victims of larger processes. Similarly, both state and non-state Thai representatives have been sensitive to international media representations of Thai culture as the underlying cause of the booming sex industry. These protests are not simply about image or hurt pride; rather, they are about representations of the other – representations that, as postcolonial theorists have pointed out, have enabled political and economic imperialism.

Chandra Mohanty's ground-breaking article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," has drawn attention to the issue of power and representation in feminist theorizing. Mohanty argues that "Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in [an imperialist] global economic and political framework. To do any less would be to ignore the complex interconnections between first and third world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in all countries."¹⁹ Mohanty points to the global hegemony of Western scholarship and its role in the reproduction of Western political hegemony. Specifically, she follows the understanding of

“contemporary imperialism” put forward by Anouas Abdel-Malek as a struggle for “control over the orientation, regulation and decision of the process of world development on the basis of the advanced sector’s monopoly of scientific knowledge and idea creativity.” In other words, Western discourse attempts to delimit the political possibilities for the globe, such as the correct “path towards development” or the content of “modernity.” Western knowledges and ideas, therefore, have a political power that must be “defined and named.”²⁰ Naming the power of knowledge, Mohanty stresses, is essential if feminists are to forge international links between women’s struggles. Western representations of a singular and monolithic “Third World Woman” are viewed as imperialistic and imperializing by many women in the Third World.²¹ Third World feminists, therefore, call for a feminism that makes the links between First World and Third World, takes the time to learn about the different configurations of gender and power (and experiences thereof) in different societies, and listens to the voices of those experiencing it.

Unfortunately, much of the scholarship and writing on prostitution in Thailand (as well as on Thai politics more generally) has adopted an imperializing gaze, which often depends upon reified notions of gender and culture rather than upon examining how power informs the way in which such notions are constructed. For example, much blame has been laid at the door of Buddhism – the official state religion – for the second-class status of Thai women (which is seen as having paved the way for their entry into prostitution). Generally, it has been argued that it is more difficult for women to climb up the ladder of merit (women cannot, for instance, be ordained as monks – an important source of merit) and much easier for them to slide down (e.g., because of the demerit that is associated with female sexual misbehaviour but not with male sexual behaviour).²² While such characterizations have sometimes been adopted by Thai analysts themselves, particularly when feminist academics first began to deal with the issue of prostitution, such an oversimplified (and negative) view of Buddhism has rankled many Thais as well as more sensitive analysts. Thai analysts such as Chatsumarn Kabilsingh point out that many of the misogynistic practices incorporated into Thai Buddhism are the product of earlier Brahmin, rather than Buddhist, influences.²³ Other analysts point out that such an explanation confuses, for instance, ideological, or textual, Buddhism with actual lived experience (one of the markers of an imperialistic approach, according to Mohanty), which is historically and regionally diverse. Indeed, Buddhism in Thailand lives in a complicated relationship with animist practices, which grant women a variety of spiritual roles and social powers. According to Penny van Esterik, even Buddhist textual doctrine does not necessarily support a misogynistic worldview; rather, a variety of contradictory images of women appear in the stories of the

Buddha, which can be, and have been, drawn upon and utilized by various groups for various purposes.²⁴ Indeed, prostitute women themselves draw upon images of themselves as “dutiful daughters” and view their contributions to the family income as meritorious. Young middle-class women in today’s Thailand attend religious retreats in a form of resistance to the oversexualized image of Thai women. As Nicola Tannenbaum has pointed out in her thoroughgoing critique of the use of Buddhism as an explanation for prostitution, analysts have failed to uncover the “multiple possible meanings of Buddhism” and have instead produced an essentialized image that has more to do with “seeing the ‘other’ as being more religious, natural, etc., than the Western analyst.”²⁵ Seeing the other in this way underwrites the superiority and power of the Western analyst, who is considered more modern, sophisticated, and “civic-minded.”

It is these concerns that underlie Third World feminists’ challenge to Western feminist representations of the situation of prostitute women in developing countries. First, in the debate over prostitution, feminists from Third World countries have been at pains to emphasize the role of the American military and the global economy in the spread of prostitution. Radical feminists’ focus on the operation of sexual power alone was quickly challenged by feminists, particularly Third World feminists, who felt that the operations of power were not simply based in gender or sexuality. The overwhelming focus on sexual domination erases not only modes of opposition and resistance, but also modes of other forms of power as well. Women from Thailand who are working on the issue of prostitution argued that understanding prostitution requires understanding the international operation of the capitalist economy and its relationship to prostitution. Women are not simply victims of an international patriarchy: they are also the product of a capitalist system that positions them as cheap sexual labour.²⁶ Kathleen Barry’s presentation of the Thai sex industry as a product of male sex right is countered by Thanh-dam Truong’s analysis of it as a product of the global capitalist institutions – hotels, airlines, tour operators – that provide the infrastructure, and demand, for it.²⁷

Second, the portrayal of women as mere victims makes Thai feminists organizing around the issue of prostitution very uneasy. They recognize the essentialized construction of the Third World woman as “passive victim,” lacking the modern agency of her First World sisters and, therefore, being in need of their aid and direction. (Indeed, there is a frightening echo of the very language used by sex tourists themselves in the representation of Asian women as “passive.”) Siriporn Skrobaneck, for one, in her analysis of the “international sex-exploitation of Thai women,” has always been careful to point out the efforts of women in the international marriage and prostitution trades to resist modes of power and to act on their own behalf (although not under conditions of their own choosing).²⁸ Sukanya

Hantrakul draws attention to the “spirit of a fighter,” which she says exists in many Thai prostitute women, and she argues that the problem lies with the institutions of penal reform that attempt to discipline women into engaging in “acceptable behaviour.”²⁹

What these debates make very clear is that the politics of representation, the concern with the essentialized construction of identities, is not merely a theoretical point of interest; rather, it is part of the everyday political struggle and the operation of power, and it has historical consequence. In other words, the politics of representation is a vitally important part of international (and, as we shall see, national) politics and power that has been virtually ignored by political scientists. These concerns can best be addressed through a social constructionist understanding of politics in Thailand – an understanding that takes neither Thai culture nor Thai women as given but, rather, that views them as constructed within historical time and space and through the operation of power. Further, the above debate has brought into stark relief the importance of viewing Thai politics within the framework of the international struggle over representation. In particular, I focus on the struggle over national identity in the face of Western imperialism/ neo-imperialism and its link to gender constructs in order to understand prostitution policy as a terrain of contested identity construction.

Gender and the Nation

The construction and maintenance of borders is a complicated business. “Borders” must be mapped not simply on a geographic terrain, but also in the minds and on the bodies of the inhabitants of that geography. Without this deeper inscription, a line on a map is meaningless. “Nations,” therefore, rest on the construction of national identities. Because of women’s reproductive role, the regulation of women’s bodies is an integral part of inscribing national/ethnic identities. As both the literal and figurative reproducers of the race (through biological reproduction and cultural reproduction, respectively), women and the control of their sexuality are key to the national(ist) project. The image of the prostitute, for instance, works to regulate women’s sexual activity by confining women’s proper sexual role to reproduction. Women who “squander” their sexuality (e.g., by engaging in sexual relations outside the confines of marriage or by engaging in sexual relations with more than one man) cannot be mothers to the nation. Such women, “whores,” are duly confined to the margins of society as both a punishment to them and a warning to others. The construction of national identity, therefore, is closely linked to the construction of gender identity and the regulation of sexual behaviour.

Prostitution is a particularly rich ground for the investigation of the links between gender identity and national identity because of the centrality of

women's sexuality in establishing and maintaining them. The classification of prostitution involves identifying correct and incorrect sexual behaviour on the part of women, and distinguishing between good and bad women. Women's correct sexual behaviour – usually within the bonds of marriage and family – grounds the categories of gender (what men and women should be and do). It simultaneously undergirds the categories of class (which men and women properly understand and apply) and national identity (which women are the mothers to our nation? The ones who populate the motherland that the manly state seeks to protect). Women's stepping outside the boundaries of proper sexual behaviour destabilizes these categories. The invocation of prostitution (understood to be a shameful and unacceptable sexual behaviour) serves to discipline women's behaviour into accepted modes and, therefore, to stabilize these other categories. With this understanding, I look at gender as a social relation of power, as a process of imposing certain hierarchical identities of masculine or feminine that are then read as natural and unchanging. Gender, rather than being a pre-given identity emanating from sexed bodies, is something that is constructed through operations of power. The construction of gender carries particular power because its constructedness (and, therefore, the operation of power) is so easily hidden in the apparently natural division between male and female bodies.

National identity, like gender, is also a constructed category invoked to unite certain peoples against an outside "other" and to legitimize state authority over a particular territory. Feminist theorists have drawn attention to what most theories of nationalism have ignored – that the nation is fundamentally gendered. Women stand in a different relation to the nation than do men. Some theorists of nationalism and gender, like Kumari Jayawardena, argue that moves to establish a sovereign nation – as opposed to clans or kin groups – also open space for women's citizenship rights by dissolving old kin-based loyalties.³⁰ Others point out, however, that the control of women and women's sexuality remains central to ideas of national identity. Floya Anthias' and Nira Yuval-Davis' now classic study, *Woman-Nation-State*, outlines five ways in which women have tended to

participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices: as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories; as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.³¹

It is women's symbolic role as mothers and biological and cultural reproducers that is most central to my discussion here, since it is this role that is central to discourses of national identity. The material effect of these roles is the control of women's sexuality, which is seen as central to maintaining national identity. This centrality leads to an "intense preoccupation with women's appropriate sexual conduct," which "often constitutes the crucial distinction between the nation and its 'others.'"³²

Women's sexuality, therefore, can mark the very borders of the nation-state – its purity, the purity of the nation; its defilement, the defilement of the nation. The prostitute, therefore, appears as a liminal figure in relation to the mother, as she marks the borderlands of female sexuality. She is the internal "other" that threatens the purity of the nation. The rise of the prostitute, in this formulation, signals the loss of control over female sexuality and, therefore, is a harbinger of the disintegration of national culture and identity. Most threatening of all, the prostitute – seen as one who uses her own sexuality for profit – is a subversive figure. While all women's sexuality can be viewed as at risk of "foreign invasion," the prostitute appears to seek out such invasion. She is a potential fifth column within the nation, which is anchored by female purity. (Indeed, that the prostitute figures regularly as a spy in various literatures and histories comes as no surprise here.) Other accounts of prostitution as sexual labour, or as the operation of male sexual privilege, must always vie with this powerful symbolism of the prostitute. At most, these accounts may argue for a more sympathetic understanding of the prostitute as a victim of larger forces (a symbolic rape victim). Within the context of concern over defending and maintaining national identity (as in this period of globalization), however, the perpetrators will appear as foreign (foreign militaries, rapid modernization/Westernization).

As symbols, both prostitute and non-prostitute women are denied national agency. Anne McClintock has argued that women's symbolic relation to the nation denies them active citizenship: "excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politics as its boundary and metaphoric limit: 'Singapore girl, you're a great way to fly.' Women are typically construed as the symbolic bearer of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency."³³ Indeed, the centrality of the symbol of women has rarely translated into full citizenship, although some women have been able to trade on their cultural role in order to gain social power. As with women more generally, therefore, the agency of the prostitute is always problematic. Seen as an agent, she is an accomplice in the destruction of national identity; seen as a victim, she is sympathetic but also powerless. These portrayals encourage patronizing and stifling reactions.

With the rise of Western colonialism this symbolic national discourse

was internationalized. The regulation of racial/sexual boundaries was central to the colonial project. Women's bodies were again important boundary markers in this process. The colonial community was consolidated through the call to protect White womanhood (pure, virtuous, and "civilizing") from the colonial other, which was figured as a sexual threat. Colonized women came to be read either as sexually voracious (i.e., prostitutes) or as unwilling victims of oversexed local males, the latter portrayal requiring the intervention of the colonial power in order to "rescue" them. White prostitute women, meantime, were represented as victims of an international ring of White slave traders. It was this process that underlay early international intervention in the field of prostitution – through international conventions on the White slave trade at the turn of the twentieth century. In this way a particular discourse of gender was internationalized.

The designation of bad girls and good girls, of proper gender identity and sexual behaviour, therefore, has long been a part of international politics. It is a process that deserves closer investigation because it helps to shed light on modern-day issues such as the sex trade in Thailand. In the present-day debate over the sex trade in Thailand, the prostitute's constructed status is often forgotten. A full understanding of the current situation requires that we recognize that prostitution is a symbolic terrain deeply embedded within gender and national constructions at precisely the point where the two identities intersect. How such constructions have worked to shape understandings of the modern-day sex industry in Thailand is what this book shall explore.

About this Book

Sex and Borders covers the development of prostitution policy in Thailand from the late 1800s to the present day, viewing it as a product of struggles and debates over national identity and gender. While male prostitution, child prostitution, and migrant prostitution in Thailand and elsewhere have become larger issues over the past decade, this study focuses mainly on Thai women because they constitute the majority of those working in the prostitution industry in Thailand and because it is the assumptions and concerns about these women, much more than those about men, that have shaped policy. The discussion of migrant and child prostitution has been an important part of recent attempts to address prostitution, and there is, therefore, some mention of these phenomena here; however, I have only discussed them in terms of how they are interpreted within prostitution policy. Similarly, because of the influence of Western colonialism and the continuing hegemonic status of the West writ large, I have focused solely on Western representations of identities as the constraining and enabling force in international politics. This is not to say that the regional dynamic is not an important influence in shaping the gender and national politics

of Thailand. Indeed, other fascinating investigations are possible, such as those that focus upon the influence of Japanese constructs of identity (particularly given Japanese involvement in the sex industries of Asia). However, I limit myself to considerations of Western representations of Thailand and the Thai sex industry and hope that further investigations will some day examine the Asian regional context.

I also offer very little discussion of the role of Buddhism in Thai society. Buddhism's framework for understanding the self and human nature certainly informs Thai society, much as Judeo-Christian beliefs help to form the web of understandings within Western society; however, as mentioned above, Buddhism's explanatory power has been greatly overextended and applied to cultural determinist readings of Thailand, Thai politics, and Thai gender systems. For that reason I have generally avoided discussion of Buddhism, perhaps too much so; but I hope that this avoidance serves to highlight the more complicated process of cultural production that is at the core of the Thai sex industry. Suffice it to say, for those unfamiliar with Thailand and Theravada Buddhism, that some 90 percent of Thais profess to being Buddhist (although not necessarily practising, or practising devoutly) and that Buddhism figures as a central pillar of national identity (often styled, in the twentieth century, as "Nation, Religion, and King"). Further, the Buddhist belief system revolves around the concept of continual human rebirth, based on one's store of merit (i.e., good deeds), until one achieves the ultimate state of Nirvana, or Enlightenment. One's store of merit depends upon correct thinking and behaviour, such as avoiding causing harm to other living creatures, being generous, and avoiding desire for material things (which will only cause suffering). The idea of merit certainly shapes understandings of status and power in Thailand (those with power and money are assumed to have achieved them due to their large stores of merit), and particular interpretations of what is or is not meritorious shape general understandings of what is good and bad, moral and immoral (including with regard to sexual behaviour). However, while Buddhism provides part of the background of Thai society, vast generalizations about Buddhist belief give us little insight into the specifics of historically located responses to prostitution.

The research for *Sex and Borders* is based on both primary and secondary sources. In 1996 I spent six months in Thailand conducting field research for this book. During my time there I conducted in-depth interviews with some twenty-five key activists, directors of women's organizations, academic researchers, journalists, and bureaucrats whom I had identified through preliminary research or to whom I was directed by sources within Thailand. These people were perceived to be key players in addressing prostitution in Thailand. Given the attention generated by prostitution issues in Thailand over the last thirty years, there were certainly many

more people who could have offered different perspectives and insights; however, a number of these perspectives are already represented in the literature, and I hope that those to whom I was able to speak represent important, though less well known, points of view (i.e., those of female politicians and female bureaucrats). Although I had achieved a basic level of (Central) Thai before beginning my research, the interviews were conducted in English, a language in which all interviewees were very competent. The interviews lasted anywhere between half an hour and two hours and were open-ended; that is, interviewees could direct me to what they deemed important (which often yielded delightful and helpful insights that I would not have discovered on my own).

The most important limitation of this research is that, as a discussion on the discourses that shape prostitution policy, it necessarily focuses upon middle-class and elite voices – the voices that have had the most direct influence on government policy. My conversations with prostitute women were casual. This is because I believe that, while it is indeed prostitute women's voices that need to be heard, my contribution as a political scientist (i.e., as someone trained to analyze those voices closest to the centres of power) could only be to create a space for them. While some excellent work, by those more capable than I (e.g., Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sukanya Hantrakul, the activists at EMPOWER), has been done to uncover these voices, I hope that much more will be done in the future. Here, I propose only to open up the possibility that such voices could contradict many of the assumptions being made in popular discussions of prostitution.

Documentary research for this project was conducted at the offices of the main feminist organizations in Thailand, particularly the offices of Foundation for Women and the Friends of Women (both of which have very helpful and patient staff) as well as several excellent research libraries in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. These included the Siam Society, the Thailand Information Centre, the Women's Studies Centre at Chiang Mai University, the United Nations offices in Bangkok, and the various libraries of Chulalongkorn University. I also closely tracked opinion and events through the two English-language papers in Thailand, the *Nation* and the *Bangkok Post*, from July 1996 to July 1997. While the language of publication necessarily limited what insights I could gather, my purpose was not to uncover "Thai opinion" but to trace the representation of "Thai identity" to the West. Additionally, these two papers are recognized as the key media of educated, Westernized, middle-class, and elite opinion making; therefore, they provided me with insights into how these particular groups sought to represent and to construct themselves and others. While my Thai language skills were not sufficient to allow me access to the wealth of information available in the very active Thai-language press, and while this limits the scope of this research, I do hope that this discussion will open doors for future research.

Further to the issue of language, throughout *Sex and Borders* I have relied upon the Thai transcription system of the Thai Royal Institute, which is based on phonetic transcription without tonal marks (except where common usage or the source being quoted dictates otherwise). I use “Siam” when referring to pre-1939 Thailand and “Thailand” after that date (despite the more complicated history and politics surrounding the change in name). For Thai names I have tried to follow the transcription used by the persons themselves; for historical personages I have used traditional transcriptions. In line with Thai usage, throughout this book Thai people are referred to by their given names rather than by their surnames, and they are entered in the Bibliography according to their given names. Titles are used where required, particularly where they are needed to denote class status. The terms “M.R.” (*maum ratchawong*) and “M.L.” (*maum luang*) for minor royalty, along with *Thanphuying/Khunying* for grades of “ladyship,” appear throughout (with the exception of Lady [*Khunying*] Laiad, who is most commonly referred to in the English language historical literature by the English term). I also use *Phra* for monks of the Buddhist order (the *Sangha*).

Sex and Borders examines prostitution policy in Thailand from the semi-colonial period in Siam to modern-day Thailand – as the country moved from a traditional monarchy to military authoritarianism to democracy. None of these transitions was, of course, complete or clear-cut. The place of the monarchy in Thailand remains (or, more appropriately, has been made) central in many ways, even though it is no longer absolute. In the post-1932 era, the monarch is technically a figurehead who is subject to the rule of law through the Constitution but who continues to have a great deal of moral and symbolic influence. The monarchy, as a source of legitimacy and influence, is central to my understanding of class divisions in Thailand today. Before 1932 the monarchy was the core of political power. I have used the term “absolute monarchy” loosely here to refer to the monarchical system between the early fifteenth century (the *Ayutthayan* empire) and 1932, under which ultimate decision-making authority rested with the king. It must be pointed out, however, that some, like John Girling, would argue that the “absolutist theory of an all-powerful god-king (*chao chivit* ‘lord of life’) contrasts with the reality of a balance of power among king, princes, and nobility.”³⁴

Indeed, an extensive feudal elite, denoted by a system of “dignity marks” – the *sakdina* system, literally “power of the land” – worked to administer the kingdom’s affairs. The *sakdina* system ranked each and every member of the kingdom, from royalty through slaves. The higher the rating of a noble, the more land and (more important) more labour (serfs, or *phrai*) controlled by the noble.³⁵ The influence of this class system is still felt today, particularly in the continuing power and influence of the elite class. I use “elites” broadly to refer to those with links to the more traditional

centres of power in the monarchy and upper echelons of government. For example, the *khunyings* (ladyships) are women who have been recognized by the monarchy for their service and dedication to the nation. Elites and elite women also generally come from wealthy families, but it is important to distinguish them from the *nouveaux riches* of the post-1970s period. Today, elite women also tend to be an age cohort that is somewhere over fifty (i.e., women who were in their thirties or older during the 1973-6 democracy period), although this is not necessarily the case. This distinguishes them from the generation of student activists in the 1970s who are now, approximately, in their forties. The term “new middle class” refers to the new class of post-secondary-educated, often urbanized, individuals who work in particular sectors of the economy (e.g., the managerial and professional sectors). For the rural class, which continues to rely, at least in part, on the land for survival, I have used the generic term “peasantry” to distinguish them from the urban working class and rural elites.

Chapter 1 discusses the historical background of prostitution policy in both absolutist Siam and post-monarchical Thailand. In particular, it examines the links between gender and international representation that were established in the semi-colonial era as British, American, and European powers gained a foothold in Siamese politics and economics and the Siamese monarchy struggled to maintain its independence. The chapter then follows the developments in prostitution policy that followed the overthrow of the monarchy in 1932 and the establishment of modernizing dictatorships under Field Marshals Phibun and Sarit, who sought to make Siam/Thailand part of the international society of modern nations, in part through the manipulation of gender identities and the disciplining of sexual behaviour. Chapter 2 covers the period surrounding the “democracy era” of 1973-6, which shook the foundations of Thai society and politics. Sometimes referred to as the revolutionary period, this confluence of peasant uprisings/communist insurgency and middle-class student activism changed the face of Thai politics forever, as a military dictatorship was overthrown but then re-established with brutal force a scant three years later. It was during this period that the deep and lasting connections between peasant women’s sexual behaviour (particularly in prostitution) and national identity were established, as students pointed to American military involvement in Thailand as the source of degradation of Thai culture and Thai women. Chapter 3 addresses the role of elite women in the reconstruction of Thai identity – particularly the attachment of the peasantry to the imagined nation – in the aftermath of the crackdown on the democracy activists and the re-establishment of a soft authoritarianism (or “guided democracy”) under General Prem Tinsulanond, who oversaw the beginnings of tremendous growth and development in the Thai economy. Chapter 4 covers the flip side of these developments, the political economy

of prostitution tourism under Prem and the critiques of these developments by middle-class women's non-governmental organizations. Chapters 5 and 6 also cover two aspects of the same period, the 1990s, in Thailand – a period of rapid political change as the new middle class, born out of the prosperity of the late 1980s, began to make its claim for political power. Chapter 5 discusses the construction of the new modern man in Thailand, viewing it as the newly modernized, urban middle class's attempt to respond to the relationship between its “international image” and the prostitution problem. Chapter 6 explores the development of the critique of the prostitute as a “material girl,” viewing it as a response to the need for an increasingly modern middle class to anchor its national identity in the peasantry and in women's bodies.

Sex and Borders

