

Love and Sexual Relationships in a Globalized World

Relacionamentos Amorosos e Sexuais em um Mundo Globalizado

Rapports Amoureux et Sexuels dans un Monde Globalisé

Relacionamientos Amorosos y Sexuales en un Mundo Globalizado

Marion Bottero

Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, Paris, França.

Abstract

With the development of globalized exchanges, sexual and/or sentimental relationships between developed and developing countries are becoming more and more frequent. Through the comparative study of relationships between Occidental and Thai or Malay people, we will see how Occidental and Oriental actors use hierarchies of gender, class and race to try to valorise their economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. In Thailand, lower-class women seek access to financial stability while in the neighbouring country, upper-class women aspire to freedom from local culture. For Occidental men, what hides behind their desire of the “other” is a rejection of "Occidental values", especially sexual equality, and a return to values considered more "stable", "traditional", and "hierarchical". We will see how love interactions in a globalized context are an instrument to valorise the different forms of capital, in Bourdieu's sense, and a way to redefine social hierarchies.

Keywords: Globalization; Power; Capital; Mixed Couples; South East Asia.

Resumo

Com o desenvolvimento dos intercâmbios globalizados, as interações sexuais e/ou amorosas entre os países desenvolvidos e em desenvolvimento se tornaram mais frequentes. Por meio de um estudo comparativo das relações entre Ocidentais e Tailandeses e Malaios, veremos como sujeitos Ocidentais e Orientais usam as hierarquias de gênero, classe e raça para valorizar seus capitais econômico, cultural, social e simbólico. Se na Tailândia, as mulheres oriundas das classes desfavorecidas buscam uma certa segurança financeira, no país vizinho, as mulheres das classes abastadas desejam a liberdade em relação à cultura local. Para os homens ocidentais, o desejo pelo « outro » esconde uma rejeição dos « valores ocidentais », particularmente a igualdade entre os sexos, e o desejo de retomar valores considerados mais « estáveis », « tradicionais » e « hierárquicos ». Nós veremos como as interações amorosas

globalizadas valorizam diferentes formas de capital, no sentido de Bourdieu, redefinindo hierarquias sociais.

Palavras-chave: Globalização; Poder; Capital; Casais Mistos; Sudeste Asiático.

Resumé

Avec le développement des échanges mondialisés, les interactions sexuelles et/ou amoureuses entre les pays développés et en développement deviennent plus fréquentes. A travers l'étude comparative des relations entre Occidentaux et Thaïlandais ou Malaisiens nous verrons comment, par le biais des hiérarchies de genre, de classe et de « race », les acteurs occidentaux et orientaux tentent de revaloriser leur capital économique, culturel, social et symbolique. Si en Thaïlande les femmes issues des classes défavorisées peuvent espérer une certaine assurance financière, dans le pays voisin les femmes d'un milieu aisé souhaitent accéder à davantage de liberté face à l'emprise de la culture locale. Ce désir de l'autre cache souvent chez les Occidentaux un rejet des dites « valeurs occidentales », notamment l'égalité des sexes, et une volonté de retour vers des valeurs considérées « stables », « traditionnelles » et « hiérarchisées ».

Mots clefs: Mondialisation; Pouvoir; Capital; Couples Mixtes; Asie du Sud-Est.

Resumen

Con el desarrollo de los intercambios globalizados, las interacciones sexuales y/o amorosas entre el Occidente y los países en desarrollo se tornan más frecuentes. Por medio de los estudios comparativos de las relaciones entre Occidentales y Tailandesas o Malayas vemos como, por la perspectiva de las jerarquías de género, de clase y de “raza”, los actores occidentales y orientales tienden a valorar sus capitales económicos, culturales, sociales y simbólicos. Si en Tailandia las mujeres oriundas de las clases desfavorecidas pueden esperar una cierta seguridad financiera, en el país vecino, las mujeres de las clases abastadas desean el acceso a la libertad frente a la cultura y de la religión locales. Este deseo por el otro esconde, frecuentemente, por parte de los Occidentales un rechazo de los dichos “valores occidentales”, particularmente a la igualdad entre los sexos, y una voluntad de retornar a valores considerados más “estables”, “tradicionales” y jerárquicos”. Vemos así como las interacciones amorosas globalizadas son un instrumento de valoración de diferentes maneras de capital, no sentido de Bourdieu, y una manera de redefinir las jerarquías sociales.

Palabras Clave: Globalización; Poder; Capital; Parejas Mixtas; Sudeste Asiático.

The development of transportation means, commercial exchanges, new communication technologies and the popularization of tourism facilitates sexual and/or love interactions between developed and developing countries. These relationships are becoming more and more numerous and common. Whether it be in Asia, Eastern Europe,

South America or Africa; through the intermediary of the Internet, matrimonial agencies, mass tourism or sexual tourism, many Westerners decide to go in search of what they can no longer find at home. The structure remains the same: through gender, class and “race” hierarchies, social actors try to revalorize their Bourdieusian economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital¹.

I have chosen as a “particular case of the possible”² love relationships between Western men and local women in Malaysia and Thailand. The research field includes two cities from Thailand and two from Malaysia. In Thailand, it is Bangkok and a smaller city situated in the north of the country, Chiang Mai. In Malaysia, the fieldwork was carried out in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang, a city situated in the north west of the country. I have been on the field for three years and have interviewed more than 70 couples and around 30 other persons interested in this

kind of relationship or family and friends of people having a relationship with a foreigner.

The main focus of our study is the search for different forms of power. Western men valorize gender complementarity in order to regain a certain male domination, rejected in the context of the Western gender identity crisis. Thai women look for financial support and a secured future, while Malaysian women seek cultural freedom.

What are these processes of identity re-creation and valorization of capital that influence contacts with the foreign other? If globalization, through migration, allows the population to mix, does it not eventually reuse and reproduce the same class, “race” and gender hierarchies within these different cultures?

Context

The Interspace

"Here it's a man's paradise"

"In Thailand we feel like a child in a toyshop"

"In Thailand I can have a new life, a new youth"

All the above reflections from Western men expatriated in Thailand, which represents the thoughts of many others, introduce the notion of *interspace*.

This notion is strongly dependent on the representation that Western men have of local women. As we will see, this *interspace* is very much present in Thailand while being absent in Malaysia.

Mass foreign tourism in Thailand was developed on the model of “Rest and Recreation” camps, where Vietnam War G.I.s came for rest and entertainment in the “smile country”. The low cost of living, the development of touristic and entertainment infrastructure, the apparently easy access to alcohol, drugs and girls has promoted an atmosphere where everything seems possible.

For Erik Cohen (1996), in countries where mass tourism is highly developed, the touristic infrastructure is separate from the rest of the culture and from the daily customs of local life. Tourists revolve in their own world, encircled by the local society but not integrated into it. They are only able to meet tourism representatives (hotel, restaurant or transportation staff, guides, etc.) and rarely local people. We can find this *interspace* in all countries where mass tourism is highly developed. This space does not represent the local, nor does it conform to Western norms, values and rules. It is not exactly the place as it is experienced by local people, but neither is it a simple playground for Western people devoid of all contact with local life and rules, even if it often

appears as so. This touristic bubble gives an illusion of freedom, independence and adventure; a reassuring bubble in which tourists, and to a lesser degree expatriates, can circulate. The local only makes brief and folklorized appearances, usually through the intermediary of local women, and in a way that rejects so-called “Western values” such as individualism and gender equality.

According to Marc Augé (1992), “le lieu s’accomplit par la parole, l’échange allusif de quelques mots de passe, dans la connivence et dans l’intimité complice des locuteurs”. In order to find his/her place (“lieu”), there must be verbal communication exchange and understanding between the social actors. But, frequently, tourists know neither the local language nor the culture; they have only some vague imaged representations. The difficulty of establishing a rapport, an understanding with local people, often incites tourists and expatriates to gather together with other Westerners who look alike in order to share their experiences and their feelings about the trip or the life there. The symbolism of the *interspace* is created more between Westerners than with local people (even with local women). Local women do not contradict men’s expectations; they normally try to show an aspect of their identity which does not conflict with the representation

that Westerners expect of local women and local life. They will also use the “local culture” to reach their goals (bride price, a man’s duty to support his wife, etc.).

In Malaysia, I could observe in my fieldwork that the *interspace* is relatively absent. This is probably caused by different factors:

- The recent development of international mass tourism;
- The good level of English spoken by local people;
- The fact that local middle class is used to participating in local tourism in the same places and ways as the tourists;
- Islam is less “exotic”, valorized, mystified and Occidentalized than Buddhism. Fear of Islam prevents any kind of sublimation.

All these factors make the perception of the local more real to Western tourists or expatriates. We will also see that relationships between Westerners and local people are very different.

Contractual and Independent Expatriates

There are two different types of expatriates: contractual and independent. Expatriates are either sent by their companies from their country of origin (contractual), or they find a local job on their own in Thailand or Malaysia (independent).

Contractual Expatriates

- A corporation sends them from their country of origin, or they have a job in Thailand with a contract and a recognized status in their country;
- They stay only a few years in Thailand and then they go back to their country or are sent to another one. They usually have a good salary including an expatriation bonus;
- They do not have to take care of the formalities of moving, accommodation or visas. The corporation takes care of everything for them;
- They have a legal status in the country (work contract);
- They often expatriate with wife and children;
- They belong to a high social class;
- They are present principally in Malaysia but also in Bangkok.

Independent Expatriates

- They are more active and involved in the process of expatriation;
- They have a travel background and decide at some point to settle down somewhere;

- They are generally single men;
- They are numerous in Thailand on the islands and in small cities, while less present in Bangkok;
- They are generally from a lower social class;
- They have tourist visas which they renew as many times as possible by crossing the border or buying fake visas;
- Those who stay often marry to a local woman, which allows them to obtain a visa and buy a house or a shop (bar or guest house) in their wife's name;
- They are mainly retired persons, or they receive unemployment benefits from their country, or are on long and repeated holidays. Sometimes they obtain a local contract (for example as a language teacher in their mother tongue) or do export business;
- Their relationships with local women are different from the ones that contractual expatriates have. These independent expatriates are more dependent (at an economical, legal and linguistic level) on local women.

The Western Gender Identity Crisis and the Liquid Modernity

"They behave as men. They want to work, to be independent, to earn one's living. They don't need us anymore. They are no longer attractive".

Cyril, a French man living in Chiang Mai and married to a Thai woman, used these words to describe Western women. Most of the expatriates have similar opinions. The current context of the gender identity crisis in Western countries following the emancipation of women seems to incite some men to look for a foreign wife that they see as "traditional". This "exotic" attraction seems to hide the desire for a relationship where gender identities can be more affirmed than in Western countries.

The gender identity crisis in France has been observed and analyzed by many authors (Badinter, 2004; Dubar, 2000; Rault, 2003). It is represented by a loss of gender points of reference and a decrease of the importance of gender differentiation in identity construction. Some authors also speak about a masculinity crisis. This theme is not new; it has reappeared periodically in France for more than a century, with variable intensity. Male identity construction has reportedly become more difficult because of a succession of social transformations that depreciate traditional

male characteristics. If being a man was formerly shown by virility, current forms of identification are more complex and multiple. However, virility is still a part of male identity. It matches with the expectations of a liberal economy and individualistic society by enhancing a competitive spirit and performance, self-control and autonomy.

This new masculine identity is influenced by economic and social success, and no longer related only to physical strength. Thus it is accessible to few men, only those with cultural and economic capital. The gender identity crisis affects mainly lower or middle-class men for whom virility and traditionally male behaviors were the principal way to be a man and express their manhood. The majority of independent expatriates belong to these lower or middle social classes. Almost all of these men deplore female emancipation and the loss of traditional gender identity points of reference, as well as the evolution of the traditional conception of the couple. Contractual expatriates, disposing of better social and economic capital, often agree with these traditional values but in a more moderate way, without putting it forth as one of the primary criteria in their choice of an Asiatic partner.

Western Women as Mutants

Most of the expatriate interviewees denounce the behavior of Western women. They affirm that “they behave like men”, “they compete with them”, “they don’t take care of themselves” or that “they are no longer attractive”. The issue comes from the growing independence of women that encroaches upon masculine identity. Women are no longer considered feminine because they adopt masculine behaviors. But we will see that the loss of femininity actually comes from the fact that these women do not allow men to act manly anymore. They need less and less protection, physical and economic support. They do not depend on men anymore, thereby breaking a binary relationship (a gender identity constructed through the opposition of masculine and feminine values). This break is disconcerting for men with low social and economic capital who are dependant on the submission and dependence of women to valorize their own male identity.

Furthermore, they are “demanding” and are looking, consciously or not, for a man with an equivalent or superior social and economic background. They enter into competition or confrontation with men. They are no longer restricted to the household, but also have a career. As Elsa Dorlin points out, Western women

are reduced to the category of *mutantes* by a lot of Western male expatriates (2009a, 2009b). Their behavior is considered too “manly”, and they are thought to transgress gender categories by valorizing women’s emancipation and gender equality.

Most of the male interviewees reject gender equality and look for complementarity. They consider that a relationship with an Asian woman offers a better promise of gender complementarity. We have also observed a general rejection of “Western values”, which are strongly influenced by Catholicism; a rejection of the moralization and control placed on sexuality.

Liquid Modernity

Beyond the gender identity crisis, we note that our contemporary Western societies are losing their stability, their coherence and their solidity. The sociologist Z. Bauman (2010, 2009) calls it “liquid modernity”. Liquid modernity, like the gender identity crisis, describes a plurality of identities and communities resulting in a difficulty to define ourselves as a person and to feel like a member of a group. The domains traditionally invested by feelings of belonging (such as work, family or neighborhood) are no longer central and reliable. The idea of “liquidity” can also

be found in love relationships, as the multiplicity of commitments and their intrinsic fragility do not incite people to invest in intimate relationships on a long-term basis. The Western men with whom I have frequently spoken to criticize this fact. They basically point to the fact that the family and the couple, often questioned, restructured and plural, no longer give a strong and reassuring life structure for people. We will see that the search for an Asian partner is a way, for some Western men, to find a kind of hierarchy and stability they can identify with.

If egalitarianism and individualism played an important role in the gender identity crisis, “traditionalism”, “femininity” and “exoticism” seem in turn to offer an Asian remedy to Westerners confronted by gender identity issues.

The desire of the Other

If the representation of the East has evolved for centuries, in all times it has been constructed in opposition to the West. The East is the other exotic: feminine and inferior (Said, 1997). According to P. Bourdieu (2002), differential socialization leads men to like power games and women to like men playing these games. Thai and Malaysian women underline, in very different ways, these universal games of power and the socialized desires that they

induce. We will be able to observe this through the Ideal Type of Local Women in Contact with Western Tourists.

Ideal Type of Thai Women

Thai women in contact with Westerners, tourists or expatriates, are predominantly from lower social classes. They come from the countryside and have left school at the age of 14. They moved to big cities such as Chiang Mai or Bangkok to find a job and provide for themselves, for their parents and sometimes for their children. Whether they are “bar girls”, masseuses, sellers, hair dressers or employees in the tourism sector, they all see in the *Farang* (Thai word for Westerners, white foreigners) an economic security and an insurance for the future. They often meet Westerners in the prostitution or tourism world (massage saloons, spas, guest houses, restaurants, shops and transports). “Bar girls” constitute the main contact for tourists with local people, sometimes the only one. Westerners tend to believe that these “bar girls” represent all Thai women.

Strictly speaking we cannot talk about prostitution as such because the exchange is done in an indirect way, either through a third party or by offering gifts, and not by direct money payment. First, the man pays the bar to get a girl out for

the evening; this is an allowance for the loss caused by the departure of a girl. The “bar exit” usually costs 500 Bahts, which is 12.50 Euros. Thereafter, he may pay for her emotional, domestic and sexual services with gifts (hi-tech goods, clothes, etc.), restaurants and bars. We can consider here Mauss’s “gift principle” (2012) as the basis for the exchange (it allows to deny prostitution) and the building of an emotional relationship. This gift principle is reciprocally based on the gift of the body and services from the woman and the gift of material goods from the man.

Ideal Type of Malaysian Women

We have to point out that the majority of the Malaysian population is composed of *Bumiputras* (“sons of the soil”). These *Bumiputras* are mainly constituted by Muslims Malays (more than 50%) and other indigenous people (around 11%). Then there is a minority population of Chinese (about 25%) and Indians’ origin (about 10 %) that constitute the rest of the Malaysian population³. The majority of Malaysian women engaged in a relationship with Western men are of Chinese origin. Even if official statistics cannot be found to confirm this tendency, we can assume from my interviews and participant observation that they represent about 70% of these relationships. Nonetheless,

Malay women are quite interested in these relationships as well, and they represent almost 30% of local girlfriends. Indian women are not well represented, there are only a few. At first glance this tendency is rather unexpected when we know that the majority of the country's economy is in the hands of the Chinese. Malay women belong to the middle class, and the government allows them a lot of privileges as *Bumiputras*. Indians, on the other hand, are amongst the most disadvantaged social class.

Malaysian women involved with Westerners have often travelled, studied or worked in a Western country. In Malaysia, contacts between Westerners and local people often take place in a professional or university environment. Malaysian women present a profile totally different, even opposed to, Thai women. They are from the middle or upper classes, and they have a social, economic and intellectual capital superior to their Thai neighbors.

Mia Chao and SPJ

Mercenary relationships between Thai women and *Farang* remind us of *mia chao*, or the “rented wife” of the sixties. During the time of the Vietnam War, a great number of American G.I. was based in Thailand for rest and recreation leaves. A Thai woman would live with an Ameri-

can G.I. for the duration of his stay in the country. She would be paid for housework and sexual services, but these arrangements were often mixed with an emotional commitment (Cohen, 1996). Likewise, we have noticed that a number of current relationships between tourists or expatriates and native women are based on this principle of exchange.

In Malaysia, some local women in relationships with Westerners are pejoratively named *Sarong Party Girls* or *SPG*. This negative label is given to the women who are explicitly looking for a Western boyfriend. It is necessary to highlight that it is usually high-class Malaysian women who give this name to native women who are less privileged, and are, therefore, seen as illegitimate in their search for a Western man. They are predominantly middle-class citizens and lead a way of life and thinking that they consider as “Western”. However, they usually have never been abroad. They go regularly to social places (such as bars, restaurants, cultural and linguistic centers, etc.) patronized by Westerners. They usually try to highlight stereotyped tastes and habits that they consider as signs of wealth, progress and high social class, such as a taste for champagne, wine or French cheese, for example.

The *sarong* reference in this expression might be a historical reference to

colonial times when local women courted English, Portuguese or Dutch settlers. The purpose of the use of this terminology seems to represent these women as *kampung*, which means countrywomen. Whatever it may be, this expression seems to underline a distance between the social origin of these women and their socializing, between the popular and the urbane, between what they really are and what they want to be or show. The juxtaposition of the words *sarong* and *party* can be seen as an antinomy whereby *sarong* underlines the modest origin of these girls, and the word *party* highlights their yearning for social elevation.

Attempts to acquire social, economical and symbolical power through a white man are set up by different processes of identity formation. Thai women underline their gender identity. They point out their disadvantaged origins and their female condition; that is, their position as “dominated” economically and sexually, in order to incite Western men to protect them and help them economically. As opposed to that, Malaysian women underline their social identity. They valorize their economic and social capital, and show themselves as equal in comparison to expatriates’ standards.

Femininity, Exotism and Traditionalism

Western men insist on Thai women’s “femininity”, “exoticism” and

“traditionalism”. They frequently use these three words to define local girls in Thailand. The analysis of these words will help us to understand the representation of the “other” and what actors expect from each other.

Femininity

They value characteristics considered “feminine”. They are described as “small”, “slight”, “discreet”, “modest”, “reserved”, “coquette” and even “light”. They have “long hair” and “take good care of themselves”. All these descriptions lead to the idea of pretty little dolls who are not troublesome and who stay in their place. These representations correspond to the female principles that we can find in the “*valence différentielle des sexes*” (Héritier, 1996). These attributes which compact and physically diminish Thai women allow men to value their virility through size and physical strength.

We observe a transfer of the notion of femininity from the body to the behavior in Western men’s descriptions of Thai women’s femininity. More specifically, their words focus on a woman’s behavior toward her husband: “they are not in competition with us”, “in our relationship each of us has our own role”, “they stay in their place”, “they wait on their husbands hand and foot”, “she treats me like a king”. They describe a woman who thinks more of her husband’s good than her own, and

who is not as demanding as a Western woman can be. The Thai woman appears as particularly dependent and perfectly embodies the domination of women by men.

Through the notion of femininity we are able to see that these men look for a complementarity and a gender hierarchy, while rejecting the equality and the competition that occurs in the West.

Exoticism

Exotic sexuality (here Eastern) is considered to be a fact of nature, whereas Western civilization is seen as repressive (Foucault, 2006). The notion of exoticism is a symbol of what is foreign and different, but it also suffers a negative connotation: the exotic is inferior, wild, underdeveloped, uneducated and illogical. Such a perception of exoticism allows local people to be placed, especially native women, alongside nature. Local women are “simple”, “they live one day at a time”, they just need “to be protected and fed”, they practice a “natural sexuality”. In this way, Western men value their cultural capital, considering themselves to be more educated, more intelligent and more civilized than their girlfriends. Asian women represent the “sexual other” par excellence. However, this erotic exoticism has an ambivalent connotation: it is at the

same time natural and wild but also deviant and dangerous.

The notion of “exoticism” does not clearly appear in Western men’s discourse about Malaysian women. Why would the idea of exoticism change from one South East Asian country to another? Why would this sensation of exoticism also depend on the gender of the Western partner? If we look closer, this notion of exoticism symbolizes more a social and economic gap between partners than a cultural difference. Indeed, if we analyze the profile of the social actors, we observe that Westerners who mention exoticism are involved in a relationship where economic and social differences between partners are very pronounced, and where the local partner belongs to a disadvantaged social class. For couples with quite important and equal cultural and economic capital exoticism has no place, as each partner sees the other as “the person that he/she loves” and “the person with whom he/she lives”, and not as the representative of another culture or religion.

Traditionalism

The word “traditional” is assimilated into the idea of an ancient order, cherishing differentiation and gender complementarity among couples. Westerners frequently use the notion of “tradi-

tionalism” to describe at the same time both the natives and love relationships. In Malaysia, this notion is opposed to the notion of “modern” and suffers a negative connotation. In Thailand, it indicates a “serious” person with respectful behavior; the connotation is positive. Being an upper-class citizen in Thailand dictates a stronger respect of traditions and better self-control. In Malaysia, belonging to this upper class allows some freedom with respect to traditions.

Ideal of the “Westernized” Wife

The expression “Westernized wife” is often used by expatriate men to define their Thai girlfriends and is represented in opposition to the “traditional wife”. The word “traditional” defines a cultural incomprehension between partners and an economic interest from the local woman. This expression suffers a negative connotation while the West (strongly denigrated until now) reappears in a positive way. Thus, the ideal of the “Westernized” wife is opposed to the fantasy of the exotic woman.

The “Westernization” of the Asian woman ensures the sincerity of her feelings and provides the assurance of a stable relationship. A “Westernized” woman will be considered as high value, but equally rare (“all the others are interested in

money”) and, therefore, more expensive. We can observe a valorization of her symbolic capital and, by extension that of her partner.

The ideal of the “Westernized” wife is largely spread within the expatriate community in Thailand. However, Thai partners generally have no knowledge of the West and barely share Western values (such as gender equality or individual freedom in the relationship). In reality, the “Westernized” category allows men to deny the Thai partner affiliation with the world of prostitution. The stigma of prostitution is then applied indifferently by locals and foreigners to low-class native women who associate with Westerners. Nonetheless, being “Westernized” does not mean to be Western. Western women are denigrated by Western men. “Westernization” symbolizes the influence of Western superiority, the superiority of the “white man” bringing up and civilizing native women. It is the Western man that brings them to the culture, removes their primary and natural vices such as perversity and venality, and makes sure that the relationship is sincere, serious, stable and lasting.

The opposite relationship structure (Western woman/local man) is less widespread and presents a totally different typology. Gender identities and expectations are relatively in opposition in this relation-

ship structure. Thus it is more difficult for both genders to reconcile behavioral dictates in the case of this structure. Gender identities cannot complement one another in the same way as between Western men and local women. Could it be one of the reasons that these relationships are less numerous and often fail?

Identity Re-creation

From the Western men's point of view, expatriation allows a valorization of Bourdieu's capital, in its different forms, and a re-creation of their identity. Expatriates can, more so than in their home country, change their social affiliation and aspire to a social status which would be difficult to achieve in the West. They can be, imagine or pretend to be, whoever they want. Love relationships in a globalized world, offers then a framework that facilitates the interchanges of social hierarchies. A globalized world impacts at the same time the reproduction of inequalities and the social rearrangements. Thus, it tends to reactivate class divisions by allowing actors to reposition themselves in the social structure. It allows actors to move from hierarchical local structures by taking advantage of larger hierarchical structures.

This social shift enables to value economic and symbolic aspects of their personal experiences. Expatriates can

claim jobs which are more valued than in their home country, as well as contacts with other expatriates that they would never have the opportunity to meet in the West. In Thailand and Malaysia the expatriate community experiment less social and economic differences in relation to their homologous of French nationality, even though such position is a fragile one. It may last only for the time of expatriation. On the other hand, the "impatriates" (expatriates coming back to live in their home country) suffer from issues related particularly to their change in social status.

The expatriates' identity formation process seems to set up an "identity recreation", which means the creation of an identity in the sense of a "leisure identity". Outside of their country they can be whoever they want, they can extract themselves from their social condition, from the weight of the obligations that they have been assigned to. The "international" space enables illusion, so one can play with the signs of one's social rank. In all countries we can observe a set of specific criteria and codes that socially situate a person: clothes, behaviors, language, places where one lives or studies, etc. Abroad, we can play with the misreading of these signs and on the fuzziness which results from the national diversity of social indicators.

This kind of “leisure activity” can sometimes be regarded as a game. When they live or travel into a foreign country, some Westerners give a false identity, sometimes even a false document. They assume that not being in their countries, and therefore as foreigners, they can justify any illegal practices as “not important”, “not serious”, and with no “real consequences”. So, practices which are morally and/or legally prohibited can be disregarded as unimportant (prostitution, pedophilia, etc.). Some Western men would in this sense use the local folklore to justify and downplay their behavior: “it is common here to see an old man with a child”, “it is a way to help them”, etc.

More than a search for something different or the openness towards the other, these intercultural exchanges could be seen as an attempt (more or less conscious) to value capital and/or reconvert capital. In the context of globalization, through the “other” who is far and different, social actors can achieve economic and social status which would be difficult to gain in their own country. Similarly, in a world marked by Bauman’s concept of “modern liquidity”, Western actors try to reinstate “traditional” interactions with the “other” (Asian) in terms of gender, age, class or race, which seems to give them the illusion of a momentary stability of their male identities. It is then that inter-

culturality experienced through love and sexual exchanges in a globalized world signify in many ways a way to circumvent economic contexts, be it in terms of social classes or social reproduction.

The sad irony of modern institutionalized tourism is that instead of destroying myths it perpetuates them. Tourists come back home with the illusion that once they have been there, they can speak with some authority about the country they have visited. However, they have often only circulated within the *interspace*. The more tourism is developed, the more it becomes institutionalized and standardized, and even more important become the barriers between tourists and local people. If frontiers were formally situated between countries, they now become informal and internal to the countries. We can observe the same process in globalization. If it favors migration and population mixture, the representations and the capital of the “other” are used by actors who are interacting and reproducing hierarchies according to their own choices and advantages. These globalized exchanges, taking advantage of worldwide social inequalities, only renew and reiterate “race”, gender and class hierarchies, thus promoting their perpetuation.

Notes

¹ Depending on the field in which it functions, capital can present itself in four fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility; and as *symbolic capital*, which could be honor, prestige or recognition.

² "Cas particulier du possible", Bourdieu (2002, p.11).

³ Source: www.asiainfo.org/asianinfo/malaysia/pro-religion.htm, selon les estimations de 2004.

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Marion Bottero : est docteure en ethnologie de l'Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, Paris, France. Elle est membre du groupe de recherche FIRA. Sa thèse a porté sur la mondialisation des échanges amoureux. Ses recherches actuelles ont pour thématique le genre et les rapports de pouvoir.

Email: marionbottero@gmail.com

Marion Bottero: é doutora em antropologia na Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, Paris, França. É membro do grupo de pesquisa FIRA.

Email: marionbottero@gmail.com

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