


## Negotiations in Space and Time: Changing Gender Relations in Thai Tourist-oriented Encounters



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[ *Abstract* ]

The paper addresses Erik Cohen's pioneering work on tourism in Thailand, specifically his publications on the relations between Thai women and foreign (*farang*) men in tourist-oriented encounters. Of sociological-anthropological interest is his conceptualization of these relations as "open-ended prostitution as a skilful game of luck" based on his study of a Bangkok *soi* (lane) in 1981-1984, and his exploration of Thai culture in terms of ambiguity and contradiction. On the basis of recent ethnographic research in the northern Thai tourist hub of Chiang Mai and wide-ranging observations on tourism development in Thailand, we examine continuity and change in these male-female engagements since Cohen's research, especially in the context of the increasing availability of such electronic agencies as social media, messaging, video chat, and

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internet dating. Whereas Cohen's concept of ambiguity and illusion has tended to disappear from physical spaces, it seems to have resurfaced in virtual space. The complexities of host-guest relations, and particularly the interactions both within the variegated category of "guests" themselves and then between their "hostesses" are explored in terms of sites of tourism-oriented encounters in both physical and virtual space so as to deconstruct these oppositional categories which have been formative in studies of tourism.

**Keywords:** Hostesses, guests, ambiguity, negotiations, Thailand

## I . Introduction

The focus of this paper is on hostesses and guests engaged in what we have conceptualized as "bar culture" and what Erik Cohen referred to as "open-ended prostitution" in Thailand in his pioneering field research in the early 1980s in Bangkok (1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1996e, 1996f). Field material has been collected in the important tourist hub of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand since 2013 with informal research engagements going back to the early 2000s. Cohen's definition of the open-ended character of prostitution was that Thai girls involved in these activities were "prepared to extend single, basically mercenary sexual encounters with *farangs* [foreigner] into more protracted liaisons, which usually involve a complex mixture of sentimental attachment and pecuniary interest on the girls' part..... Many *farangs* are confused by the girl's conduct; on the one hand, they tend to believe that the girl genuinely likes or loves them; on the other, they are plagued by doubts as to her seriousness, sincerity and faithfulness" (1996e: 306, 307). Cohen characterizes these relationships as "incomplete commercialization" and he conceptualizes and generalizes these in terms of a set of paradoxes or contradictions in Thai socio-cultural life, compounded by the pressures, tensions, and rapid transformations in urban life in Thailand, the integration of Thai society and economy into a globalizing world from the 1970s, and the rise of the Internet and electronic communication (1996b: 253-254, 264).

## II . The Neglect of Clients and the Problems of Conceptualization in the Hostess-Guest Encounter

Until Cohen's detailed studies in the 1980s, and subsequently Cleo Odzer's personal ethnography (1994) and Marc Askew's research on Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok during the 1990s (1999a, 1999b, 2002: 251-283) there was very little material available on the nature of and the processes involved in these complex relationships in Thailand. Indeed, the strength of their work was that they focused both on the diversity of the categories "hostesses" and "guests" (or clients) and the complexities of their interactions. As Husson has emphasized recently, based on her extensive research in Indonesia, Thailand, and Hong Kong from 1997 to 2015 and her access to a considerable secondary literature in French, much of the research on the sex tourism industry in Southeast Asia has excluded the guests, their diverse backgrounds, expectations, motivations, and behavior (2017; see also Bishop and Robison 1998; Thorbek and Bandana Pattanaik 2002). In addressing both hostesses and guests and their interrelationships, these diversities and complexities are compounded when Cohen also stated perceptively that "there is often no crisp separation in Thai society between emotional and mercenary sexual relationships. Rather, such relationships form a spectrum, ranging from premarital, marital, and extra-marital love-relations, through permanent or protracted liaisons between relatively wealthy men and poor concubines or mistresses (*mia noy* or "minor wife"), to short, commercialized sexual encounters in brothels and massage parlors, of which there are virtually thousands, even though prostitution in Thailand was outlawed in 1960" (1996b: 251).

In this paper we have addressed the issues of definition and conceptualization in this field of study, bearing in mind Cohen's difficulties in using the term "prostitution," his analysis of the complex, ambiguous, and contradictory encounters between young Thai hostesses or bar girls and foreign men, and the fact that, at the time of his field research, a considerable number of women "engage in prostitution only on a part-time or seasonal basis, and move in and out of the occupation, so that they can hardly be labeled 'prostitutes'" (1996a: 354; 1996b: 260-261). The "open-endedness" of

these gendered relationships and the concept of “a game of luck” was also in need of qualification even a decade or so after Cohen’s research (in the 1990s) in that he himself noted that the expansion of sex tourism along with the problem of AIDS and the government of Thailand’s policies to address the threat through information campaigns and the encouragement of protected sex, had led to the increasing “routinization”, “standardization” and “institutionalization” of the sale of sexual services. It became “more of a gamble, but less of a game” (1996c: 290-291). The open-endedness became “attenuated,” “the leeway for playing the game was narrowed,” and “the frequency of the other, more ambiguous, and open-ended types of relationship seems to have fallen off” (1996c: 290).

Cohen concluded his reflections on the changes that had taken place during the 1980s and into the 1990s with the preliminary conclusion that “it still remains to be seen to what extent better means of self-protection and safer sexual practices will further modify the culture of tourism-oriented prostitution in the future” (1996c: 291). Our recent work on the cultural practices and evaluations of encounters in bars, the organization and operation of these practices, and the networks generated both in physical space and in the context of the revolution in communication technology (which Cohen had not been able to address to any extent at that time as another factor of change) suggests that a re-evaluation of these bar-related elements of tourism in Thailand is required. In addition, Cohen’s intriguing analysis of the personal letters written between *farang* males and Thai girls, for example, is now a thing of the past (1996e), and has been replaced by instant messaging, video chat, WeChat, Hangouts, and other electronic media.

We also deconstruct the increasingly complex categories of “guest” and “hostess,” examining relations among the clientele of bars, their changing relations with “hostesses” in the context of changes in bar culture, and the interactions between bar girls and their managers as a consequence of changing patterns in the management and ownership of bars.

### III. The Concept of the Bar and Bar Complex

We have attempted to provide a sociological-anthropological framework in this investigation in terms of a concept of “the bar” and “the bar complex” as a site or space of interaction, negotiation and role-playing both in a physical sense and as part of a digital arena so that there is both a boundedness in certain encounters, and a wider space that is provided (not entirely unbounded) through messaging, video chat, and the use of Thai-dating and other electronic sites. The boundedness is however, fluid; we operate with a clearly defined bar unit, but there is also a set of relations between neighboring bars or a bar complex, and sometimes a senior bar with junior outliers. Networks also operate across these units, with, for example, “floaters” and “semi-freelancers,” but they have a site or a set of sites in which they situate themselves from time to time (Molland 2012). In this connection Husson classifies prostitution in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, into four types, though these are not necessarily mutually exclusive: (1) “the classic or formal”: the visible, closed, supervised, located kinds of encounter in bars, night clubs, and massage parlors; (2) “the occasional”: open encounters usually undertaken by freelance or independent workers; (3) “the undercover”: includes the prostitute as a “guide” or “escort” who offers sexual services as part of an overall entertainment experience which may be extended for more than one night; and (4) the “sex tour”: a package organized for a group of clients (2017: 214). There is also a temporal dimension to this spatial one, in that the discussions and negotiations take place over time, and the changes in female-male encounters that we are addressing reach back to the contexts within which Cohen worked in the 1980s. Husson’s classification also does not take account fully of the expanding opportunities which the Internet opens up for different kinds of encounter.

What we have witnessed, not only in the field of bar culture but in the consumption of goods and services more generally, is that many physical spaces which provide the opportunity for social encounters and cultural exchange are struggling to maintain their presence, and the rise of electronic dating sites is concurrent with

the gradual, but fitful decline in the bar scene. This is consistent with other trends in the development of digital space, in that it increasingly undermines the position of the agent or intermediary, in this case the bar-owner and manager. What also has to be acknowledged is that Thai women are much more assertive, confident, and empowered than they were when Cohen was undertaking his research. The knowledge that has been developed among them over several decades about the opportunities and risks involved in these encounters, improvements in their use of English, and the guidance and advice that have been passed down from one generation of hostesses to another (given that significant numbers of young women then moved into bar ownership and management) provide for an increasingly complex and informed arena for negotiation, discussion, and exchange with their clientele.

On the other side, the male clientele, as Husson has also indicated, is now more varied in their backgrounds and knowledge; rather than the short-stay tourist, there are also permanent or semi-permanent expatriate residents who continue to frequent bars, have known some of the hostesses over several years, and, in some cases, have gained a degree of fluency in the Thai language. These are primarily Westerners, Japanese, and Koreans. Some bars more than others have a regular customer base. More so than when Cohen undertook his studies, the bars are increasingly patronized by men who fully understand their function and mode of operation; they want to have a drink, socialize, and sometimes spend a night with one of the bar girls; in these contexts of encounter, there is very little, if any ambiguity on either side, and the open-endedness of gender relationships of this kind, which Cohen explored in the 1980s, seems less applicable, as Cohen had anticipated in the 1990s.

We emphasize that we are not concerned with the important preoccupations of Thai research on gender relations, human rights, and prostitution, and the national policies of the Thai government in this arena. We have not engaged with the political economy of the sex industry, trafficking, or the necessary and obvious concerns with AIDS and other diseases, which we recognize fully as serious public concerns in Thailand (see Hughes 2000; Steinfatt 2002). Nor have we addressed the complexities and the socio-cultural and

economic pressures of gender relations in a Buddhist society (see, for example, Jeffrey 2002; Khin Thitsa 1980; Lyttelton 2000; Pasuk Phongpaichit 1982; Wathinee Boonchalaksi and Guest 1994). Even in the substantial literature on sexual relations and prostitution in the digital age there is a focus on those who provide the services rather than the diversity of the clientele, and an emphasis on exploitation, sexually transmitted diseases, Internet abuse and pornography, and child prostitution, among others (see, for example, Flowers 2011; Veena 2007). Husson, with reference to Sébastien Roux’s work in Bangkok (2009), says that Roux argues that “prostitution cannot be reduced to a univocal relation of domination” (2017: 212). Following this principle, our focus is on the development of an ethnography of relationships, and the agencies of both hostesses and clients (see Askew, 1999a, 1999b; Jamieson 2013; and Eades 2007; Hoefinger 2013). In this regard we are responding directly to Cohen’s pioneering research in Bangkok and what has changed since then, though we acknowledge that the valuable research of Jackson and Cooke (1999) and van Esterik (2000) on changing gender relations in Thailand are important in contextualizing our concerns. But we are asking the following questions: How do encounters play out in the negotiations between men and women at the present time in a digital world? What is the current role of bars? What are the respective strategies of hostesses and guests? What do they bring to the encounter and how do they perceive it?

#### IV. Methodology

For ethical reasons in research on sensitive personal relationships which are legally ambiguous under the laws of Thailand, we have taken great care to anonymize our sources. Our case-studies have been based on five years of intermittent research on a selected number of bars in the tourist districts of Chiang Mai from 2013, particularly the popular area of Loi Kroh and the associated Thai Boxing (*muay thai*) Stadium, which we think are representative of what has been happening in this field of Thai tourism. This has comprised discussions and open-ended interviews with eight bar-owners and managers, and informal conversations with a wide

range of some 50 hostesses. We did not undertake a formal sampling process but rather entered into dialogue with those who worked in the bars and were willing to talk with us. Some of the hostesses have been based in Chiang Mai for an extended period of time; others have moved among tourist sites in Thailand, including Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya, and Hat Yai; some have lived for periods of time overseas where they have usually resided with male partners (in, for example, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, the USA, Australia, and Japan, or in other parts of Southeast Asia). Many of the hostesses demonstrate a remarkable willingness to move from one place to another, and our conversations and open-ended interviews with them were conducted in both Thai and English. Of the two researchers involved in this project, one has been based in Chiang Mai for several years, has conducted research there, and is fluent in Thai and familiar with the local urban environment; the other has a wide experience of tourism-related activities across Southeast Asia, having undertaken research in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines; he has also spent approximately ten months in Chiang Mai since November 2013.

We recognize that Cohen's research in Bangkok undertaken in the 1980s may not lend itself straightforwardly to comparison with our studies in Chiang Mai, though several of our informants had worked in Bangkok and in other tourist sites in Thailand and reflected on their similar experiences in these sites. Be that as it may, in our view, access to the Internet and to the digital world has generated a common medium in which all Thai hostesses operate. Their customer base is now much wider than that contained within the physical space of a bar.

We have also talked with a wide range of clients who frequent the bars: some on package tours, some independent travelers and backpackers; short-term visitors who are familiar with Thailand, and some who are not; longer-term sojourners who stay for weeks or months, and then return to their home country only to return on a regular basis; retired expatriates who are now residents in Thailand; individuals who are engaged in economic activities in Thailand and reside there permanently or who conduct business in several



countries and visit now and then. Some of the discussions were short, others sustained intermittently over several days. We estimate that these encounters approach 100. However, we have used, in particular, information supplied by 10 primary male informants for more in-depth material; and we have been able to undertake careful triangulation within a complex category.

In this regard, Husson demonstrates convincingly how diverse the seemingly homogeneous category of “client” is. On the basis of our smaller sample than hers, we could not have arrived at her extended classification. Yet, her efforts though useful, are debatable; she devises a nine-fold classification for which certain of the categories are problematic and not easily distinguishable from one another [“it’s not my fault” group; the demanding; martyrs; hypocrites; the powerful; critics; backpack tourists; those who retain power; the inhibited] (2017: 226). The hostess bar scene in which both Cohen and we are engaged is overwhelmingly aimed at and patronized by Caucasian men. The scene panders to Western cultural and sexual values, just as the sex venues aimed at different national and cultural groups pander to their respective tastes and values. We have also not included an increasingly important constituency in the sex tourism clientele and that is the Asian tourist (Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean, Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern); this demands a separate research project (see Jiraporn Boonying 2018; Walsh and Pawana Tachavimol 2007). We also set aside the substantial and significant sector of domestic prostitution and the local Thai clientele which deserves focused research.

In any methodological exegesis, there are those social science colleagues of a rather more “scientific” leaning whom, we surmise, would insist that we present details of our sampling, the number of interviews, the backgrounds of those interviewed, the process of cross-checking, the establishment of validity and reliability, and the confession of our limitations. Our defense in not presenting this kind of methodological exposure is that it is not possible for this kind of research. For example, regarding Western clients engaged in the sex industry in Southeast Asia, Husson captures our dilemma appositely when she says that academic investigations of those clients who are involved in the world of commercial sex and sex

tourism “involves getting to the very heart of a person’s intimate life when this is exactly what he wants to protect in remaining anonymous” (2017: 236). This does not mean that we should not attempt to study this important area of human activity and its consequences, but it does mean that the formal world of social science methodology may not apply. Anonymity and privacy are paramount.

We should add that our research has also comprised informal observations which date back to the early 2000s and includes consultation of the relevant websites in Thai, other dating websites and downloadable apps, and sources on recent developments in the tourism industry in Thailand.

## **V. Local contextualization**

An important contextual point is that Thai sex tourism aimed at the Western market, primarily in the form of hostess bars, nightclubs, and massage parlors, operates according to different rules depending on the administrative police district in which the venue is located, and also who owns and manages it, or has business interests attached to it. In Bangkok, which arguably has the most diverse and expansive sex tourism scene, neighboring districts often operate under markedly different regimes. These regimes are subject to frequent change and are under a variety of pressures from changing government policies—official and unofficial—as well as more specific and local issues, such as complaints from resident associations and concerns from nearby Buddhist temples.

Bangkok, Pattaya, and possibly Phuket, are home to the most liberal regimes, which permit, tacitly or otherwise, naked or semi-naked dancing, strip or sex shows, and the operation of large and noisy complexes which are purpose-built. They are surrounded by a dense layer of associated businesses, by-the-hour hotels, restaurants, beauty parlors, pharmacies, and hawkers of all description. Clubs with stages are usually concealed within a complex, but hostess bars are usually open-plan and often found in rows along a street. While legally they describe themselves as “bars”

and the girls as “staff,” their mode of operation is widely understood. They are usually called “beer bars” (*bah bia*) in Thai.

Successive Thai governments have been working more assiduously since the 1990s to change Thailand’s touristic image from “the world’s brothel” and the archetypal cheap, exotic backpacker destination, to a clean, graceful, and orderly Buddhist kingdom comprising luxury resorts and family-friendly activities; emphasis is placed increasingly on such leisure attractions as heritage, cultural and ethnic tourism, and ecotourism and health and wellness tourism (see for example Manderson 1992, 1995; Lyttleton 2000; Jackson 2004; Wathinee and Guest 1994; Chang Noi 2009). However, to date, this has meant for the most part cosmetic changes and concealment in the hostess and bar-night club industry, with some closer monitoring, rather than outright suppression, given the substantial revenue that it continues to generate.

As Peter Jackson has demonstrated, skin-deep images and “surface effects” in Thailand are valued and maintained, whilst the private sphere or places hidden from public view are often under less pressure to conform (2004). A good example of this is to be found in the travails of one of Bangkok’s primary sex tourism institutions: Nana Plaza. This enclave of three floors of strip clubs and gogo bars on Sukhumvit *soi* 4 was fully visible from the street up until a few years ago, and a sign hung over its entrance reading in English: “The World’s Largest Adult Playground.” A series of measures have resulted in not only the entrance being partially covered so that one cannot easily see what is inside from the street. A roof has also been built over the complex so that residents in the nearby Landmark and Marriott hotels could not see it from their windows. This is consistent with efforts elsewhere in the country to delimit sex tourism venues under a number of rubrics. In other terms, the purpose has been to render them as (in)visible as the prostitution venues aimed at Thais and other Asian nationalities.

Today, we detected a nostalgia among expatriates and regular tourists with whom we talked about the golden days of the bar scene, which peaked in the late 1990s. Since then the scene has

decreased in volume and diversity, and much of what remains in terms of famous venues and zones has become a pastiche. But zones and venues do remain, especially in the case of hostess bars in provinces where there is a Western expatriate community, and where there is need and feasibility to build new ones (Chiang Rai and Udon Thani both have significant hostess bar zones relative to other services for Western tourists and these are almost exclusively patronized by expatriates and their friends). Chiang Mai, whose prostitution scene was surprisingly extensive for the size of the city (Mulder 2008, 2009) has traditionally been tolerant of hostess bars, but not shows or clubs with stages. A few exist and provide the venues for such performances as pole-dancing, but they are extremely low key, do not occupy prominent sites which can be easily found by short-stay visitors, and do not attract a large customer base.

Furthermore, the established source area of many of the girls working in Loi Kroh has been the relatively poor areas of north-east Thailand (Isan), but over the last few years there has been a number of northern girls, many from Lamphun and Lampang, arriving to work in the city. This is a development which requires further research, but this may be explained by the continuing surge of rural-urban migration in Thailand and the young's desire and search for opportunities which are perceived to be offered by urban environments along with their perceptions and experiences of the lack of opportunities in rural areas.

## **VI. Hostess bars and bar girls**

The ubiquitous term "bar girl" describes a woman who works in a hostess bar; we use both terms: "bar girl" and "hostess." Hostess bars emerged during the Vietnam War, established specifically for Western and not Asian men. They remain the preserve of mostly Western men, and spaces for the acting out of Western "cultural and sexual values," primarily in the playing of Western music, the choice of Western alcohol and the lack of food, and the impression of fun-loving, free, alcohol-drinking girls who are available for other

services. They can sometimes be large establishments, but more typically appear in open-air rows of small individual units. They contain, at the very least, a bar that serves cold beer and a small range of spirits, music, stools, sometimes pool tables, and most importantly two or more bar girls.

The responsibility of the bar girl is to entice and entertain male customers, encourage them to buy drinks, and submit to leave the bar, if the negotiation is successful, with a customer for sexual relations in exchange of cash payment. In order to obtain a bar girl for this purpose, the customer must pay a “bar fine” to secure the girl’s release from work. This is typically and currently around 500 baht (US\$16). He must also reach a private agreement with the girl beforehand regarding the amount he will pay her directly. On some occasions this negotiation is deliberately avoided by both parties until the point at which they leave, especially if the customer is inexperienced. Generally, a bar girl can be “bar-fined” for a short-time (one to two hours), a long-time (until the following day), but also for longer periods which can be negotiated on an individual basis. Aside from sexual encounters, a bar girl can make some money through “lady drinks” bought for her by customers. “Lady drinks” are a hostess bar institution; this can be an alcoholic drink, but often a very small glass of non-alcoholic juice that costs at least twice as much as a large bottle of beer. Nevertheless, the category of bar girl is itself complex and variegated.

## **VII. Bar girls, networks and families**

It has already been indicated that many of the bar girls are relatively mobile, and, consequently well-networked. But the networks usually operate through personal relationships, family recommendations, and by word-of-mouth. Thai women quickly and efficiently organize themselves into networks centered around a charismatic senior—a “godmother” (*jao mae*)— although this term is most often used in a pejorative sense to refer to such a person who is perceived to be full of themselves or haughty. The godmother behaves overtly like a mothering patron, and, in principle, expects obedience and loyalty

in return, though they range from those who are more maternal and others who are more domineering. However, the female owners and managers of bars are usually sponsored; either they have a partnership with a resident foreigner or they have been supported by a *farang* and then subsequently separated or been divorced; usually the latter do not go with customers; there is an etiquette of responsibility and respect; bar-owners lose that respect and authority if they do what their girls do. They will facilitate and entertain customers, take them to a night-club (with suitable bar girls in the entourage) but then draw the line across their own sexual encounters.

So, for example, a number of bars in the Loi Kroh district of Chiang Mai which recruit girls from the north-east of Thailand, incorporate them into a set of family-type relationships which are also one's of patronage expressed in maternal or godmother terms. They are looked after, provided with food (often girls cook and eat together) and accommodation and not exploited in the same way in which other more impersonal and casual clubs and bars operate. As Facebook group data show, a percentage of independent women actively choose this work. Beyond such women, a significant number may feel obligated to work, through ties to their home networks and strong feelings of responsibility as daughters and mothers to support their families. But then, as Cohen proposes in his thesis there are ambiguous degrees of deception; in this case bar girls can be offered lump sums by a bar-owner to recruit girls from home, which they do without furnishing details to the recruits; the recruits then agree to work in the bar and extract "lady drinks" only, but eventually, after acclimatization, make the decision themselves to start going with customers (see Molland 2012).

When a girl arrives to work in a bar, often from a rural area, she therefore has guaranteed food and shelter, though, initially an uncertain income, but she may receive some financial support from the bar-owner, and small amounts of cash in hand. Some girls become successful, earn a good income, and ultimately secure their main prize, a financially supportive *farang*. Others struggle, earn very little, and either move into the more precarious environment of local brothels and massage parlors, or they return home. There are

also girls who have entered a liaison with a *farang* which then goes wrong, and, following the separation, they look to return to some security at the bar.

The bar girl duties are to work for the bar and serve drinks, help to clean tables and do general tidying when the bar closes (if they are not with a client). Some female staff do not sell sexual services; they are straightforwardly bar staff and wage-workers and usually they have some connection with the bar-owner and are supported; their earnings are obviously modest; usually they have very little command of English. In addition, bar workers will look after one another's children; invariably most of the bar girls are from broken Thai marriages and they have children who need to be supported; the women in the bar support the children, unless they are sent back to Isan to be looked after by parents and other family members. As we have already indicated bar girls receive a percentage on the drinks that customers purchase for them. This is one of the main functions on behalf of the bar; they sit and talk with *farang*. This then also results in more guest-guest awareness, relations and exchanges which we discuss below in terms of clientele role-playing.

Some girls, popular and more out-going with good English, can earn an appreciable income from bar drinks alone, in some cases approaching 8,000 to 10,000 baht a month. Bar girls have to agree with the fee for the bar-owner should they spend the night with a customer. However, this can be variable. Some customers are regulars, and they may negotiate fee-waivers with the bar or a discount; it is for the girl to negotiate her own fee, though with a regular customer there is usually an on-going agreed fee. The level of the fee also depends on the kind of service that is required. Girls are usually tracked when they leave with a client, which is usually not a problem with a regular customer and someone known to the bar.

Regarding casual *farang* visitors, the bar will usually be informed of their destination with the girl; there is therefore a measure of security for the girls through the bar-fine and their established connection. Problems arise when some girls go to

night-clubs after the bar closes, if they have not secured a customer for the night; relationships negotiated in a club context may carry a greater degree of risk. Risk may also increase when some girls who have worked for a bar previously have gone semi-freelance; they may continue to have a connection with the bar and that is where they do their main trade, but they have a looser relationship with it. There are also “floaters” who move from bar to bar; some bars tolerate them, especially if they are attractive, and the bars then allow them to do business because they attract more customers who buy them drinks.

There are also frequently closer relationships among neighboring bars. Sometimes if business is slow in one bar, there might be a transfer of the income from some drinks from a bar doing rather better business. On occasion, some girls may move among selected bars. Relationships among several of the bars are tight-knit; some of the bar-owners used to work together as bar girls; at a formal level they do not compete in the pricing of drinks and other services; they operate as a cartel; they may discount informally, but this is not openly advertised. “Happy hours” or overtly discounted drinks do occur but are not generally operated in the Loi Kroh area. Staff often socialize outside the evening bar hours or hold parties for each other to celebrate birthdays and other anniversaries; they may provide other kinds of support and assistance, for example, child-minding for the offspring of a bar girl who has to leave Chiang Mai for a while.

### **VIII. Client-host roles and relations and the decline of illusion**

Cohen describes a milieu in which Western men and Thai bar girls regard each other across a considerable gulf of misunderstanding and deceit. This informs his “typology of relationships” (1996b: 260-261), which aims to demonstrate the complexity of relations between these groups based on the following four analytical types: Mercenary, Staged, Mixed, and Emotional. These types represent points on a sliding scale between a limited and unemotional economic transaction, and a meaningful (in Western terms) sexual



relationship based on “love.” This typology may still be useful to some degree, but we have found that currently the gulf of understanding between hosts and clients has been greatly reduced if not bridged.

The element of illusion has all but disappeared in the Thai hostess bar scene. By “illusion,” we mean the deliberate action to disguise or heavily de-emphasize the fee-seeking aspect of the hostess-guest relationship, in order to suggest that a hostess only leaves the bar with a customer to whom she is genuinely attracted. This was the very basis of Cohen’s characterization of hostess bar prostitution as “open-ended”—its grounding in a contrived “beginning” that could resemble that of a normative relationship for the Western male customer.

Our in-depth observations demonstrate that this element of illusion is no longer present or necessary. Deceit, where it occurs at all, is employed superficially by a bar girl to attract sympathy from potential customers and make them feel safe and secure. Typically, this takes the form of claiming they had only worked in the bar for a week, or that they had never before left the bar with a customer. Obtaining thoughtful and honest reflections about deceit from female informants was difficult, although many acknowledged in a general sense that this was a standard strategy to allay customer fears of sexually transmitted diseases. Male informants, for their part, uniformly related that girls would make these claims as standard practice. Interestingly, their opinions on the purpose of these claims was less to do with the risk of disease and more about an effort to maintain an impression of virtue. The essential function of a bar as a place to drink and buy sexual services however, and that of a bar girl as a sex worker available to any paying customer, was, in a variety of different terms, explicitly acknowledged by all of our informants.

This decline of the need for subterfuge and illusion in bar culture is reflected and compounded by the changing patterns of ownership and management of hostess bars. Since 2010, we have observed a number of bars appearing and disappearing in Chiang Mai which are or were co-owned by a Thai ex-bar girl turned

manager and her foreign husband. Five out of six specific examples involved a Western-Thai couple who first met as tourist and bar girl. In all these cases, the Western husband would serve drinks and act as a convivial host, while his wife would manage the Thai staff. We also discovered several examples in which Thai female bar managers co-owned their business with a non-resident Japanese spouse. We also informally noted hostess bars owned and managed by single Western men as well as those married to Thai women in the tourist districts of Bangkok, Kanchanaburi, Udon Thani, and Chiang Rai.

Limiting the discussion here to what we observed in Chiang Mai, the appearance of Western male bar owners, in addition to the presence of long-term sojourners and expatriates, has helped to further corrode the illusion of hostess bars and their female staff being anything other than what they are. This is not to suggest that bar customs, etiquette, and ambiguity do not continue to play a role in the personal negotiations involved in customer-bar girl relations. But the fee-seeking aspect of the bar girl's work and its implications in a prolonged relationship is no longer hidden, disguised, eluded, or ignored by either bar girl or customer. In other words, the open-endedness, naiveté, and illusion have to some extent been transferred to virtual space—the Internet—rendering the space of the bar fully understood to all as a place to buy sexual services.

## **IX. Role-play among the guests**

Hostess bars, especially those which are located within entertainment complexes like the Loi Kroh Thai Boxing Stadium or the Nana Plaza in Bangkok, were until recently the preserve of male expatriates and what we might call “dedicated sex tourists.” The space of the bar complex appeared to create a very strong “us and them” division between the bar girls and the Western male patrons. But the terms “host” and “guest,” as originally popularized by Valene Smith's edited books (1977[1989]) do not allow for a more complex picture of social relations in the space of the bar. We shift our attention to the often anonymous and excluded clients in the literature on sex tourism. For many men, the bar complexes were not simply spaces

in which they could purchase sexual services, but rather sites that allowed them to express their personal and male identity for the benefit of other men. Beyond the camaraderie and competition that is observable in most groups of male drinkers anywhere, the Thai bar scene with its extensive lore, its suggestion of danger and illicitness, and its requirement of initiation and specialized etiquette, provides a rich setting for those men who know the scene to demonstrate their familiarity and expertise to less experienced men, under the guise of either hostility or friendliness. To some extent, then, we must allow for a relational dynamic that does not simply divide male and female, prostitute and client, hostess and guest, but better explicates the ethnographic complexity of the social terrain of the bar and the functionality it offers.

Regardless of how much research a first-time tourist has done in advance of his trip, he is the most susceptible to initiation and help (or intimidation) from “old hands.” Hamilton (1997, also Johnson, 2014) discusses the capacity, earned from experience, of being able to correctly identify authenticity and deception in the self-qualification and identity of “the old hand.” While Hamilton and Johnson are discussing paperback novels set in Bangkok and authored by expatriate Western men, and not specific ethnographic data, these criteria of earned knowledge and authority certainly figure in expatriate values generally, and most certainly in prostitution and bar culture. Just as there is a constant supply of girls in the bars, there is a constant supply of fresh tourists who welcome initiation and guidance from more experienced men. “Old hands” can effectively be “hosts” for the first-timer guests.

The space of the bar facilitates the “old hand’s” own desired role-play experience—the assumption of this quasi-host role in which he demonstrates his authority. This can be done in a number of ways: the mechanism of the hostess bar can be explained, the bar-fine system, what can be expected from a bar-fined girl, and the short-time hotels nearby. The subterfuge and performances routinely laid on for customers can be divulged and explained—“they all say it’s their first night or week,” “they always have a sick mother in the hospital,” “they always have a Thai boyfriend and a child”; these are the stock expressions in first encounters with the hostesses. Informal

tours can also be given by “the old hand”—“One night in Bangkok”-style, which includes an introduction to the girls, or to specific girls with whom they are friendly, an appreciation of their humor and etiquette; sometimes elements of the Thai language can be ostentatiously displayed (two of our primary informants spoke fluent Thai, the remaining eight knew basic words and phrases). Anecdotes are also told about the personal experience of the “old hands” or that of legendary others he knows, often exaggerating the exotic and dangerous elements.

The role of the “old hand as host” is more common in younger expatriates and is in some ways a constant acting-out of their own self-perceived graduation from being a first-timer. They wish to remain in the tourist space, and not only that, but in the “front” side rather than the “back” side. But they need to assert their status as no longer being “tourists.” Nowhere is this more pronounced and necessary as in the case of their relations with men whom they perceive as *being* “tourists”—which becomes a highly pejorative designation in this context. “Look mate, I live here right, trust me.” “After you’ve been here for a while, you’ll know what I mean.”

The bars also facilitate more aggressive male social competition and the playing out of a hierarchy of prestige, which often takes the form of simple disrespect or dismissal, based on more universal forms of status. Most hostess bars have a bell by or near the bar, which a drinker or bar-owner can ring to indicate that he will buy a round for everyone in the bar, staff included. The bell allows those with money to force their largesse on the other men in the bar. The bell-ringer potentially asserts his financial superiority over the other men and wins the dramatically expressed pleasure and attention of the staff, who will indicate clearly the origin of the round of drinks as it is served; interestingly bell-ringers would sometimes ignore or dismiss words of gratitude, pats on the back, and even toasts offered by the other drinkers. Overwhelmingly, this mode of behavior was used by older expatriates and sojourners. This group appeared to define and express themselves as much through their implied financial capacity and gruff unapproachability as much or more than through demonstrations of expertise or knowledge.

During the interviews conducted for this research all of our male informants were keen to describe the systems through which hostess bars, sex clubs, and websites functioned, and to illustrate typical hazards that must be negotiated, usually with anecdotes about the selected “schoolboy errors” of the uninitiated, as one informant described them. Some held it to be a “responsibility” to “school” first-timers when necessary, although according to several informants, many inexperienced and ignorant tourists “deserve what they get.” The criteria used to identify inexperienced tourists typically involved the following hazards: being exploited financially either through overcharging by the bar, or less ambiguously by a girl that they have paid for; falling in love or otherwise becoming too attached to a bar girl, conforming to a very Cohenian observation from the 1980s; and unwittingly paying for and/or engaging in sexual acts with a cross-dresser or transsexual.

In summary, we observed the space of the bar and the bar complex to have social functions for some of its patrons beyond drinking and simple access to girls. The bar is a stage, a physical space, for the enactment and assertion of male self-identity and role-play with a view to validation and authority in the eyes of other men. The presence of bar girls is the basis or medium of this role play and necessary for it.

## **X. Changes in space and negotiation: from the physical to the virtual**

Cohen’s seminal studies in tourism-related prostitution were located in a defined space—a *soi* and associated bars in Bangkok (1996a). These were defined and delimited spaces, where hostesses situated themselves; some of them engaged in writing letters to and receiving them from “lovelorn *farang*.” The spaces are therefore discernible and even the expressions of them in letter-writing have a material presence. However, these spaces are declining, though many bars are still there and, if there is a regular customer base and a reasonable flow of tourists and local residents and sojourners, they are still on-going business concerns which generate revenue. We

have also considered defined spaces in regard to a bar, a bar complex, and a set of networks which orient themselves to bars. However, now the use and conceptions of space are increasingly virtual, in that hostesses negotiate in cyberspace, and engage in more freelancing. In other Asian contexts, the terms that are used for this non-bar encounter (beyond the boundaries of the bar) are “butterflying” or “side-lining” in that they are not confined to the bar, nor do these encounters necessarily require the payment of a bar-fine.

Based on research in Chiang Mai, we argue that the encroachment of virtual space over our spatial units of bars, bar complexes, and extended social networks has occurred gradually for a number of reasons. Among them, in no particular order, there has been a general decline and increased stigmatization of tobacco and heavy alcohol consumption, and increased monitoring and control by the Thai authorities; the tourist constituency is also changing. In addition, there has been a concomitant rise of varied alternative drinking establishments not linked with the sex industry in Thailand, especially in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Furthermore, in the context of recreational sex, the notion of the more private and efficient facility of virtual space is an attractive alternative, where drinking is not necessary, choices can be made at leisure, with reflection and without exposure and its pressures, and where there appears to be a lower cost of expenses (and see Eades 2007). The influence of electronic technology and the decreasing need to go to a bar to arrange for a sexual encounter have undermined the role of the bar but have not as yet totally marginalized it. Visitors can now book an encounter from their hotel room. The sites facilitate more or less instant engagements.

Internet services have changed the sex tourism industry as much as anywhere else, along a now familiar model that does away with the usual intermediary apparatus and allows the individual provider or worker to operate, much like Airbnb turns anyone with a spare room into a hotelier. Both tourists and expatriates use these sites. The commercial services provided by the sites allow men and Thai women to set up profiles in which they can exhibit as much or as little of themselves as they wish, and browse other profiles and

invite them to establish contact. This can then be carried out through the site's messaging and video chat services—and totally secure in terms of contact details—until such time as the profile-holders wish to exchange real contact information and/or meet face-to-face. According to our informants, most do not wait long before exchanging Line IDs (messaging app), Skype handles, and mobile phone numbers.

While they do use a given site's contact services, they can also avail themselves of such devices as “auto-translate” messaging in Thai-English and English-Thai, further eliminating the need for assistance of an interpreter or scribe (in contrast to the letter-writing intermediaries of Cohen's study, 1996e). In theory, the sites leave a digital footprint, and are therefore relatively safe to use due to this deterrent. Some sites are directed specifically toward fun and one-off encounters, others to long-term relationships, others still to unambiguous commercial sex. The most popular sites tend to present themselves as a dating site, but members may indicate clearly in their profile of what they are in search. Trawling bars and looking for a bar girl have become increasingly expensive and inconvenient for some of our informants, who, while they had a lingering impression of the “weirdness” of meeting women online rather than in face-to-face encounters, found the ability to trawl endless profiles full of “body specs” and photographs just as or more compelling and addictive than trawling bars.

Although there are scores of different websites, our informants had a clear favorite in “Thai Friendly.” Also mentioned were “Thai Love Links,” “Thai Cupid,” “Smoooci,” and “Thai Love Lines” (see website references). The “Thai Friendly” homepage states that the site has well over 1.5 million members. Underneath this information, it advertises: “Step 1—Browse online Thai ladies, Step 2—send a free message,” This is followed by a grid of profile photographs, showing both Western men and Thai women. Once one has signed up as a member, which takes around a minute, one arrives at a page with search criteria, some of which are restricted to paying members (weight, height), followed by page-after-page of profile photographs. Clicking on a photograph brings up that member's profile, which typically features three or four images of a woman,

and a very basic list of personal information. There is a facility for taking private notes about the member, and also for making contact, or simply for “showing interest.” The Thai women’s version also pushes the member numbers, stating that the site is the biggest “foreign partner website” in the world. It stresses that women should not worry about language capability, and simply upload a photograph to their profile and wait to receive messages from foreign men through the site.

By contrast, “Smoooci” is unambiguously a commercial sex site. Membership is not necessary to browse the profile photographs which show a price per number of hours required, lists of very explicit sexual acts that the woman will perform, and customer reviews of girls, from which they earn a “personal star rating.” Our informants drew our attention to this site, although none were regular users. Despite the fact that many sites like “Thai Friendly” feature profiles provided by bar girls looking for customers, all of our participants acknowledged one clear advantage that the websites held over the bars: the fact that with experience in assessing profiles, it was possible to secure a sexual encounter with a non-prostitute. All made a clear distinction between bar girls/prostitutes and “ordinary” girls and women on the other.

Many expatriates and even first-time tourists appear to prefer non-bar girls given a choice, although the majority of male respondents and participants stated that they would regret not having the option provided by red light areas and bars, were it to be removed. Despite voicing this preference, most informants said that they regularly find themselves in hostess bars, and continue to have sexual encounters with girls there, if and when they feel inclined. Informants claimed it was possible with experience to judge whether a profile was constructed by a covert bar girl or not. They looked for dress and appearance, English language capability, children from previous marriages, keeping strange hours, and claims of no employment. It seems a new “lore” has accumulated relating to websites and internet sexual encounters, as opposed to bar culture. This lore and the cautionary anecdotes derived from it are discussed by men using these services both in person with friends, and anonymously online. Virtual space does seem to allow some



degree of ambiguity to survive, then, now that bar space is almost completely unambiguous.

An anecdote told by one of our most cooperative informants illustrates some of the concerns, anxieties and ambiguities generated by the use of virtual space as opposed to bar space in the search for sexual encounters; it suggests some interesting continuities. Our informant had maintained contact with a number of women's profiles through regular instant messaging and video chat. His strategy was to increase the momentum of the contact to the point at which explicit photographs would be exchanged and then "virtual sex" engaged in via live video chat—something that for our informant often precluded actual face-to-face contact with the profile owners (see Benderson 2007). One evening he received an invitation to video chat from one of his regulars, although the invitation explained that there was a problem with the woman's computer camera, in that she would be able to see him, but he could not see her. She suggested that she might give him written instructions on what to do in front of his camera for her to watch. He agreed and followed the woman's written instructions to the letter, allowing her to be the director and voyeur while he remained the obedient performer. Once the session was concluded she went off-line. Several days later our informant contacted the girl again to ask if she had fixed her camera yet. The girl replied that there was nothing wrong with her camera and denied all knowledge of the incident. After asking him the time and day on which the virtual encounter took place, she concluded that one of her other Western "boyfriends" who had been alone in her apartment at the time had used her profile to trick him. He said that he felt "used and confused" when using the websites after this incident, and he now realized that despite the photograph on the profile, he could not know for sure with whom he was really engaging. His contribution to the mythology of sexual encounters in Thailand hinges primarily on the uncertainty of identity and a new kind of virtual ambiguity. In other words, who is physically behind the profile photograph? Is it merely a mask? Not only does our informant have to discern between bar girls and ordinary Thai girls online, he now has to become anxious about whether they are even girls or Thai at all. We

cannot help but see some significance in the fact that, in this virtual space, he believes he was “bested” not by a bar girl but by another Western man, illustrating the enduring factors of intra-male relations, performance and “mastery of space” in the Thai-Westerner sexual world.

Thai female users of these sites have their own lore, as the Facebook chatroom data clearly demonstrate. They fear “scammers,” about whom they swap usually second-hand anecdotes and warnings. They use this English term to refer to narratives of too-good-to-be-true profiles showing handsome young Western men who claim to be rich, and then ensnare Thai women into either parting with money or material goods, or unknowingly performing some illegal function such as drug-carrying in the form of picking up packages which they believe contain expensive gifts for them. It should also be noted that the dating websites are being used for recruitment by female procurers to “cold call” Thai female profile-holders and offer them work abroad in the entertainment industry. One informant from Bangkok is an ex-bar girl turned procurer and makes a substantial living primarily through this activity. Virtual space, then, does not only offer liberation from the staff networks and the now somewhat reassuring and unambiguous bar space, but can also be instrumental in the formation of new and markedly less friendly, less familial, and more ambiguous and illusionary networks.

We conclude that although virtual space continues to expand and encroach upon most of the functions of bar space, and despite the growing pressures on the latter from governmental and other agents, the space of the hostess bar continues for the time being to remain operational and attractive to a not insignificant number of both staff and patrons. Virtual space offers an alternative, and one that sometimes carries risks and ambiguities, but is not yet fully replacing tourist-oriented encounters in bars.

## **XI. Conclusion**

In this ethnographic investigation, we have attempted to reconsider

Cohen's earlier seminal work on tourism-oriented prostitution in which he imaginatively embraces, in both his narrative and analysis, clients and hostesses. Nevertheless, we wish to question Cohen and his co-writer Scott Cohen and their support for a "mobilities paradigm" which addresses the global dimensions of tourism and the Eurocentrism in tourism studies. In engaging with the complexities of guest-hostess and guest-guest relationships, and that among hostesses, their approach does not give us the analytical apparatus to understand these complexities and the variegated character of those engaged in the encounters (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2019). What we have to confront is the classic "host" (hostesses, bar girls) and "guest" (*farang*, foreign visitors) encounters, but with the complication that bar girls now establish relationships with sojourners and retirees not only with the casual and brief visiting tourists; Valene Smith's categories of "host" and "guest" have become increasingly diverse and complex, and therefore problematic in analytical terms. They repeat the rather stark dualisms that have beleaguered social science.

Another dimension which we have explored is networking; since Cohen's studies, sex tourism in Thailand has matured; there are certainly elements that he observed that still operate, but hostesses have become more sophisticated; some have moved up the social ladder; from bar girl to bar-owner; but, in addition, many of these young women are very mobile. With customers who are prepared to pay, they go to other destinations in Europe, the USA, Australia or more locally in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, or East Asia for a vacation. Cohen's studies address the personal/sexual character of the relationship, but then what happens after the initial encounters? Bar girls are obviously looking for customers for a night, but in certain cases they are looking ahead in an entrepreneurial sense towards a financially secure future. The problem with the concept of "open-ended prostitution" in tourism studies, which, in any case, required qualification, as Cohen acknowledged by the early 1990s, is now a dwindling social context. The clientele is simply too well informed and has too many other options for this to remain a useful way to describe their encounters. If men explicitly do not want a bar girl, they overwhelmingly use

dating sites.

Virtual space seems to offer advantages as against the physical encounters in bars which are increasingly unambiguous, though not entirely so, and which carry financial costs and other possible face-to-face difficulties. It opens up endless possibilities but also other uncertainties, ambiguities, and illusions. We conclude that virtual space will continue to expand and increasingly take over the functions of bar space. Yet, for the time being and despite the growing cyber pressures on bars, the space of the hostess bar remains attractive to a significant number of those who work there and the clientele. Virtual space offers an alternative, and an increasingly attractive arena for male-female encounters, but it is not yet replacing face-to-face tourist-oriented encounters in bars, and it carries its own risks. Bars, or at least some of them, have a future with those who frequent them but for how much longer is anyone's guess.

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