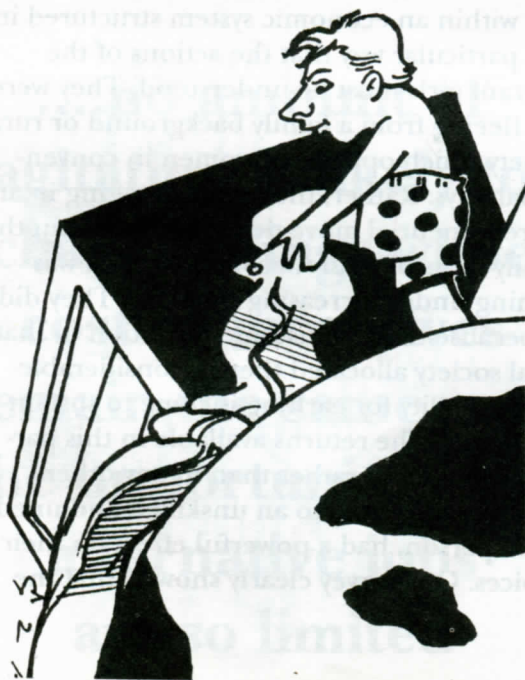




From Dok Kam Tai Girls to Bangkok Masseuses

by Pasuk Phongpaichit

From one point of view, there is nothing very special about the migration of the girls from the region of Dok Kam Tai, 60 villages in the far north of Thailand and elsewhere. Girls from poor backgrounds are simply entering the oldest profession in the world. But such a view misses all the important nuances of the Thai case. To begin with, it obscures the fact that the girls are not escaping from the ties of the family and *low rungs* of village society. Rather, they are going out to support the family, and perhaps also to improve their own position within their community. They enter into this particular trade in response to the obligations which they feel they owe their family as part of a customary role as earning members of society. They are exploited by agents or damaged by ill health.



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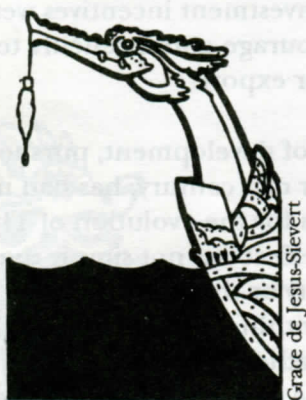
Since the 1950s Thailand has opted for a particular strategy of economic growth. In the 1970s the policy was extended slightly in that the array of investment incentives were embellished to encourage entrepreneurs to produce specifically for export.

This strategy of development, pursued now for over a quarter of a century, has had important consequences for the evolution of Thai society. Its chief effect was not simply that it swelled the city or that it constrained the countryside within a pattern of growth with stagnation. Rather, it was the combination of these two. The gap in incomes and opportunities between city and country became enormously wide. This provided the setting for the



migration. On the one hand, the urban earner could buy the services of a girl at a price which was relatively cheap within his personal budget. The Thai customers of the massage parlours extend through a wide range of social classes and income levels. On the other hand, for the girls from a poor rural background the migration gave them an earning power which was simply astounding relative to normal rural budgets. A couple of years of work will enable the family to build a house of a size and quality which few people in the countryside could hope to achieve in the earnings of a lifetime.

A similar economic rationale extended to the international arena. When Thailand began to place more emphasis on the export of goods and services produced by cheap urban labour, there was one sector in which the largely unskilled labour force already enjoyed a distinct "comparative advantage" without the need for any further investment incentives. The marketing of this particular sector more or less looked after itself. The "comparative advantage" stemmed in part from the availability of girls, and that depended on the recent history of the development of the trade. But it also stemmed from the favorable price. The agencies which marketed sex tourism stressed not only that bars were full of girls, but also that they would cost so little.



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It is within an economic system structured in this particular way that the actions of the migrant girls must be understood. They were not fleeing from a family background or rural society which oppressed women in conventional ways. Rather, they were engaging in an entrepreneurial move designed to sustain the family units of a rural economy which was coming under increasing pressure. They did so because their accustomed position in that rural society allocated them a considerable responsibility for earning income to sustain the family. The returns available in this particular business, rather than in any other business accessible to an unskilled and uneducated person, had a powerful effect on their choices. Our survey clearly showed that the



girls felt they were making a perfectly rational decision within the context of their particular social and economic structure, and they could not escape from it.

Migration is thus an intrinsic part of Thailand's economic orientation. The trade has been successfully oriented to an urban and international market and embedded deeply into the structure of the Thai economy. It provided a means of survival for poor rural families, and it helped earn the foreign exchange to cover import costs. The North-Eastern girls gradually began to lose the prominent position in the trade as Northern girls were prettier and clearly more in demand in Bangkok. Whatever the reason, it appears that the migration from the North-East is on the decline. For the North, however, the business is still on the rise. Whatever the geographical origin of the girls, there is no sign that the migration is going to fade away. The infrastructure created by the Vietnam War has been firmly established within the over-all strategy of economic development. Young girls are one of the rural resources to be exploited for the sake of the balance of payments and urban growth. Sex tourism is one of the services available through the open economy.

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The fact that the massage business has become an integral part of the Thai economy undermines any realistic possibility of short term cures. Thailand already has a number of organizations dedicated to rehabilitating the moral character of the massage girls, and also a number of more sensible institutions which try to help them out of trouble. But no amount of agitation is likely to change things while cost of incentives remain the same, and the opportunities for alternative employment are so limited.

There are signs that individual girls use their earnings to provide education for their sisters and daughters, and to set up small businesses. But if some families can use the massage earnings to clamber up one of the ladders of escape, there are other families which will slide down the stake of misfortune. Besides, evidence from the North suggests that families and villages are accumulating vested interests in the business. Sister follows sister. Neighbour follows neighbour. The only real solution is a long term one, and it lies in a massive change in the distribution of income between city and country, and in a fundamental shift in Thailand's orientation to the international economy.

About the author: *Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit* is from the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
