

*Endangered Relations: Negotiating Sex and AIDS in Thailand.* By Chris Lyttleton. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000. 260 pp.

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) swept into the consciousness of most Thais in the early 1990s. The transition from a situation of relatively little information on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS, and to some extent official denial of the threat of AIDS, to a situation where the government spearheaded efforts to make the public aware of the disease was extremely rapid. This book provides a description and interpretation of the content of the media messages that were associated with this rapid change as well as analysing how residents of two northeastern villages in Thailand interpreted these messages.

It was only at the start of the decade of the 1990s in Thailand that concerted efforts were made to influence behaviour believed to be associated with the spread of HIV. Initial efforts concentrated on instilling fear by associating certain activities with a certain and painful death. Over time, media messages became more sophisticated in presentation and less focused on death while retaining an emphasis on a small range of behaviours, most notably those associated with commercial sex. In Chapter 1 of his book, Lyttleton provides a description of the media messages used in the AIDS campaigns and an incisive content analysis of the media messages. He makes it clear that the media approaches adopted were not "value-free". Instead they focused on certain behaviours and underlying values and left unquestioned other values or institutions. Efforts were directed towards creating a "field of danger" with commercial sex at the heart of the danger. Yet commercial sex itself was rarely questioned. The solution proposed to limit the danger was, and is, the use of condoms in commercial sex.

Chapters 3 through 6 focus on HIV/AIDS and sexual relations as viewed and interpreted by villagers in northeastern Thailand. These three chapters provide a wide range of information and are a valuable contribution to ethnographic accounts of sexuality and sex in rural Thailand. Some of the author's most interesting insights are in relation to how institutional arrangements relating to exchange of money influence

understandings of sexuality and relations between the sexes. He describes how, at the village level, exchanges of money are inextricably linked to sex. For marital sex the link is made through the payment of bride-wealth. For pre-marital or extra-marital sex occurring between a man and woman the linkage occurs through fines paid by the male partner and imposed by village authorities. Fines for sexual transgressions related to pre-marital sex can be converted into bride-wealth if the transgressing couple marry.

The description of the monetary base of sexual relations in village life is extended by the author to help understand the role of commercial sex in northeastern Thai. Lyttleton suggests that the fining system associated with pre-marital sex provide one basis for widespread acceptance of paid sex. However, he also draws on his ethnographic research in the village to indicate that there is a range of acceptance of engaging in commercial sex by men and in becoming a sex worker by women. He argues that there are a variety of forces operating in Thai society and that individuals internalize these often conflicting forces in different ways resulting in a range of behaviours and outcomes. Thus not all Thai men visit sex workers and not all poor Thai women become sex workers.

The strength of the book lies in the integration of the content analysis of media messages related to AIDS and the ethnographic-based analysis of sexuality in village life. The argument that individuals interpret information in different ways, adapting new information to fit their experiences and current situation, is extended to an examination of how AIDS messages are interpreted by villagers. These interpretations can have important implications for how AIDS is perceived. For example, Lyttleton argues that the use of the Central Thai dialect in AIDS messages allows the northeastern villages to interpret AIDS as being something that is somewhat distant from their immediate surroundings. He also notes how a focus in AIDS messages on condom use with sex workers has led to condom use becoming strongly associated with identity of the partner.

It is regrettable that the language used in the book will result in many of the important concepts and ideas being only accessible to the relatively small number of readers who share similar theoretical orientations

or training with the author. Nothing would have been lost, and much gained, if ideas had been expressed in a more straightforward fashion. Sentences such as the following “Understandings imparted by the campaign form a crucial cornerstone in the way that meanings are employed to recode the economies of desire and the sense of affect in Thai sexual relations, commercial or otherwise” (p. 65) obstruct the understanding of important concepts and arguments.

The author is critical, and at times dismissive of the value of quantitative research, but is often non-critical in his own use of that research. For example the claim that since the 1970s, females have outnumbered males in migration from the northeast to Bangkok (p. 24) is only true if the large number of temporary migrants are not considered. In other parts of the manuscript there exists simplistic treatment of quantitative data. For example, he states that “the ratio of male to female HIV-infected cases dropped from roughly 9:1 in 1990 to 2.5:1 in 1993 ... In other words, in those three years many more women than men became infected” (p. 78). Given such a high initial base of male infections, a decline in the ratio of male to female infections does not translate into a higher number of female infections relative to male infections over the period.

The disparaging of research that attempts to identify structural explanations for behavioural outcomes or aims to describe characteristics of those engaged in that behaviour detracts from the value of the publication. The primarily ethnographic methodology used by the author results in a description and interpretation of one layer of meaning. But it is only one layer and taken in isolation has its own limitations. Furthering our understanding of responses to HIV/AIDS, and the behaviours associated with HIV/AIDS, require the utilization and appreciation of a wide variety of research and interpretive tools.

Although frustrating to read because of the unnecessary complexity of the language I would recommend this book to a number of audiences. I think all those who are interested in Thailand, and especially social relations in rural Thailand, will gain from the analyses presented in this book. Researchers and planners who deal with mass media will find the analysis of mass media approaches to AIDS in Thailand insightful.

Finally, those involved in public health and other areas of social policy can benefit from the argument presented in the book that in order to understand the effect of IEC (that is, information, education, and communication) messages we must understand the situation and experiences of people in everyday life.

Philip GUEST

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Philip Guest is the Program Associate and Country Representative with the Population Council in Thailand.