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UNMARRIED COHABITATION IN THAILAND

The case of Migrant Workers in Bangkok

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Abstract

This research is about unmarried cohabitation in Thailand, a country experiencing rapid economic modernization and social change. The primary aim of this research was to understand "the meaning of living together" in Thai society and societal perception toward this phenomenon from the migrant workers' point of view. The project examined the relationship of migrant workers living together in Bangkok, Thailand. Eleven informants (7 females and 4 males) were selected as key informants. I utilized symbolic interactionism as the basic framework of analysis to understand the meaning of living together from the actor's point of view. To analyze the reasons of moving in together, urbanization concept is being used as an explanatory variable. Based on the findings, the research concludes that individuals do not necessarily aim to transform social relations and radically alter the existing social order. Almost half of these people have regretted moving in together and would have wanted a different path for their relationships. The research shows that the spatial context matters in deciding to live together. In urban setting, it is easier for people to cohabit because it removes the pressure of marriage and sex from parents. There are two major findings in this study. The same as in American and European societies, cohabitation is either a prelude to marriage or an alternative lifestyle. Furthermore, most couples still wish to have marriage afterwards, which means that they do not necessarily reject marriage as a social institution. The findings also suggest that Thai societies are more complicated because there are traditions and social norms that need to be followed, such as the dowry money and big wedding ceremony.

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1. Background of the Study

1.1 Introduction

Unmarried cohabitation marks a fundamental shift in social norms and practices associated with sex and marriage within societies. While traditional societies see wedding rituals and practices as indicative of phases within a relationship, more complex societies alter these norms to adapt to the pressures of economic modernization. Social values change through time as individuals attach multiple meanings to marriage, sex and relationships. Social legislations in Europe supporting cohabitation were instituted over time as countries undergo urbanization. Increasing access to education, greater disposable income, and mass media played a broader role in shaping peoples' values made the norms and practices previously considered taboo acceptable. Additionally, economic growth impacts on family structures and social practices (Secombe 1992: 54; Berardo 1995: 117). The acceptance of cohabitation in Europe may be comparable to the growing acceptance of homosexual relationships in Thai society.

In Thailand, people seem to give different opinions about cohabitation. The older generation does not accept it but young people tend to have positive feelings about it. As it shows, Thai celebrities have admitted that they cohabited with their partner and do not think something is wrong with cohabitation. For instance, the singer Kong Saharat is very open about his cohabitation relationship with his girlfriend. Likewise, actor Ananda Everingham recently gave an interview to a newspaper that he and his model girlfriend live together (Daradaily: January 12, 2007).

In this study, I aim to unravel the multiple meanings of *living together* among working class people within their social and economic life experiences. In particular, the study attempts to understand the ways they construct cohabitation either as a "prelude to marriage" or an "alternative to marriage" or simply just an expression of human beings' sexuality. In this study, the working people have come from the countryside and have migrated to work and live in Bangkok. They were a group of people living with their partners permanently. The complexity

of their private life comes from the unorthodox setup of not being married, which defies social norms and practices especially of the older generation. While these couples live together like husband and wife without marriage, they redefine norms and give new meanings on living together especially that sexual practice in married couples is the only acceptable practice in Thai society (Ramitanon 1999 in Mukeaw 2000: 10). Since cohabitation is not different from marriage in many ways, there must be some evidence that show stability in the relationship. These include the adherence between each other, the role of husband and wife, and other shared responsibilities in a relationship. On the other hand, it may be possible that the couples do not have these indicators mentioned above; that is, they just live together with no responsibility and no plans for the future at all.

1.2 Aims of the Thesis

The primary aim of this research is to understand social changes within a specific demographic section of Thai society. The project examines the relationship of migrant workers living together in Bangkok, Thailand as a case of social change brought about by modernization processes. In doing so, it emphasizes the social construction of ideas and values within a society as a product of economic modernization. This study contributes to the understanding of that influences urbanization on social values in a non-Western context. Through this case study on migrant workers, I will try to understand the meaning of *living together* from the actor's point of view and analyze the social and economic contexts of living together as "unmarried cohabitant" in Thai society. Overall, this research, broadly within the field of sociological studies, aims to provide detailed insights on the perceptions and challenges around cohabitation in an Asian context. As such, it will also understand how couples maintain such forbidden relationship when they have already moved in together.

1.3 Research Questions

The major research question is to understand the meaning of unmarried cohabitation by looking at the migrant workers' point of view. The project is organized around the following research questions:

1. How do the migrant workers perceive the meaning of living together? What is the societal perception toward this phenomenon from migrant workers' point of view?
2. How does urbanization affect the decisions of migrants to move together? What are the consequences of these decisions?
3. How do women and men handle the discrepancy between their cohabitation and their parents' and friend's expectations? Do they handle it differently or in the same way?

1.4 Delimitations

The paper does not aim to make a generalization about the impact of modernization on social values transformation in Thailand. Rather, it makes a contribution on the factors that influence changes in the marriage institution, in this case, cohabitation as an indicator of the changing marriage institution in Thailand. It likewise takes a non-Western case to argue that modernization presents tensions and opportunities for individuals in making decisions that affect perceptions on what is "acceptable" or not. While this project utilizes symbolic interactionism as a framework for analysis (as in Mukeaw, 2000), it extends to use theoretical tools that relate modernization and urbanization. In this sense, the project departs with the previous work both in empirical and theoretical terms.

2. Framework of Analysis and Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review

The studies on *cohabitation* in the past few decades were mainly in American and European societies. For instance, Wiersma's (1983) cross-national study on cohabitation in the United States and Netherlands compares cohabitation to marriage. His finding is that when a couple moves in together, the major reasons would be romance (love) and life companionship. Further, there are some outward signs of couple involvement as questions were asked about financial engagement and other joint purchases. The cohabitants seem to retain higher levels

of individuality in comparison to their married counterparts, as manifested in their financial affairs and other activities (p 103-105).

Cohabitation in American society means 'living together before marriage'. It is seen as another form of 'courtship' more than an 'alternative form of marriage' as legal marriage indicates the steadiness of the relationship and the last step of the courtship (Macklin 1987: 117). In 1992, the POSLQ (People of the Opposite Sex Living Quarters) found out that there were 3.3 million couples that lived together before marriage in the United States; the number increase 650% from 1960. Moreover, the research showed that cohabitation had increased due to the greater acceptance of parents and friends. Meanwhile, people in American society do not look at it as something very wrong like before (Berardo 1995: 118).

In comparison to some countries in Europe, cohabitation - 'living together without marriage'– is basically seen as an 'alternative lifestyle' or another *social institution* rather than a *social deviation* or a form of *courtship* (Macklin 1987: 320 – 321). Further, this set-up is protected by social legislation in many countries. In the Netherlands, 'cohabitation' is institutionalized since society gives the same meaning to *cohabitation* and *marriage*; both are the same kinds of lifestyle (Secombe 1992: 59). Unmarried couples have sex and are accepted by society. In a study on cohabitation in Sweden, Trost (1978) found that most Swedish people do not consider cohabiting couples different from married couples and this practice has become more and more institutionalized (Trost 1978: 393-400).

Many researchers give different operational definitions to unmarried cohabitation. This affects the research findings and raises methodological issues since explaining cohabitation requires scholars to consider cultural and legal contexts. For instance, Cole gives two different meanings of *unmarried cohabitation*. First, *unmarried cohabitation* is a heterosexual couple that lives together without marriage –there is neither a wedding ceremony nor a marriage license; second, *unmarried cohabitation* is a heterosexual couple that live together without marriage for more than 4 days per week or 3 months per year (Cole 1977 in Macklin 1983: 264-265).

Couples who make a choice for cohabitation over legal marriage do so for many reasons. Such decisions are based on different value patterns, social positions, and cultural upbringing. For instance, religion and class may affect the decision to choose cohabitation over marriage, or vice versa. Based on previous research done by Macklin (1983; 1980), there are two distinguishable patterns of cohabitation:

(1) *cohabitation as a prelude to marriage – a transitional stage that either terminates or eventually is transformed into a legal marriage;*
(2) *cohabitation as an alternative to marriage – a rejection of marriage as an institution, and/or cohabitation as a true alternative (Macklin 1983; 1980).*

In Western societies particularly in the United States and in most Western European countries, *cohabitation as a prelude to marriage* is the most popular type of cohabitation. However, some countries are exceptions, such as Sweden and Denmark, where cohabitation is an *alternative to marriage*, a choice that the majority of the people often make since marriage as a social institution is not as strong in these more liberal societies (Wiersma 1983: 25).

Mukeaw (2000) suggests that in Thai society, males and females have different expectations, understanding, and reasons to living in together. In the context of university students in Northern Thailand, she found out that males attach three meanings to live-in relationships: "sex", "economy and comfort", and "true love". On the other hand, females attach only one meaning: "true love" (but no expectation of subsequent marriage). She further argues that such expectations from women carry no aspect of marriage and family as compared to the American or European cases. In her study, she chose Northern Thailand because it is a place for study where students are relatively isolated from their families thereby giving them greater freedom to decide about their interim lives (Mukaew, 2000). However, the context of the study is that she chose university student cases, which in Thai society is the group of people that are financially supported by their parents and most of their decisions in life is based on their parents. Hence, here I want to depart from her study by doing research on migrant workers in Bangkok, the group of working people that can support themselves or even support their parents back in the countryside.

Mukaew's study is the most relevant in studying of cohabitation in Thailand. In fact, from my own investigation, there is very little research written on *marriage as a social institution* in Thailand. However, I have to be careful to apply her conclusion in my finding since her interviewees are university students while I studied workers in Thai society. While both groups follow similar cultural practices and social norms as defined by Thai society, they have different social contexts with respect to their familial responsibility, level of maturity, and status in society. For example, economic dependence is lesser for the employed individuals as compared to students relying on family support.

In my study, I chose *symbolic interactionism* to help me interpret the meaning of expressions. By treating cohabitation in migrant workers as a social action, there is emphasis on "meaning work" of the agency or the construction of labels, interpretations, and the world at large of social actors. Understanding social action requires the study to take migrant workers as actors who give subjective meaning to their own experiences and relate it to the broader social contexts. By looking in-depth at their social and economic situations in Thai society, we can better realize the reasons behind their actions. Additionally, I use *urbanization* to explain why it is a factor that contributes to migrant workers' decision to cohabit.

2.2 Symbolic Interactionism as Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism as thought of by Herbert Blumer, is the process of interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals[1]. The core principle of *meaning* is that human being act toward other people and things based on the meanings that they give to those people and things, and also the meaning that other people and things have for them. Symbolic interactionism holds the principle of meaning as central in explaining human behavior (Griffin, 1997).

The theory of Symbolic interactionism is relevant for this study because it provides the basis to understand the establishment of *meaning* between social actors toward their social action. As I understand it, interaction gives humans meaning, and meaning arises out of the

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[1] Society for More Creative Speech, 1996.

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social interaction people have with each other, meanings are managed and transformed through the processes of interpretation and self-reflection that individuals use to make sense of and handle the things they encounter (Blummer in Charon 1998).

I utilize symbolic interactionism as the basic framework of analysis to understand the meaning of *cohabitation* from the actor's point of view through conversations and actions. The assumption is that actions of actors are defined by their interactions with other actors. They act in response to the other actors' actions and contexts. Moreover, the conception of the *self* is related and constructed through the interaction process. For instance, social norms (a product of social processes) are defined by consistent practices of people. At the same time, it also affects the way people behave. In sum, it takes a social constructionist position in understanding the ways people associate meanings to actions (Blumer, 1969). I find *symbolic interactionism* effective in evaluating human interaction. I believe that this is the best theoretical approach to take since human behavior is most likely to be constructed rather than existing *de facto* or *a priori*.

2.3 Urbanization as an Explanatory Variable

In Thailand today, the question of how modernization affects the organization of the family is of great sociological importance. In Smith's (1973) work on the family form in Thailand, he argues that the village consists of a pre-capitalist economy, with religion-oriented individualism and people characterized by group loyalty, all of which facilitate choices to adopt an extended family form. However, the process of urbanization has rapidly affected lifestyle and living standards both in the rural and urban areas. As economic modernization rapidly unfolds in Thai society especially in the 1980s, increased disposable incomes, influx of luxury goods from the West, and influence of mass media portraying Western lifestyle have all affected consumer patterns in Thailand. Consequently, the family structure is under intense pressure to adapt to these changing circumstances. As people move to urban areas and as living standards go up, it becomes more costly to maintain an extended family. In this sense, urbanization has been influencing the shift in family patterns (Smith 1973: 136-141). Hence, the impact of industrialization and urbanization in terms of increasing the level of acceptance

of unmarried cohabitation as a lifestyle choice is a matter of further empirical investigation. It is therefore logical to examine the relations between macro-economic changes and social values within Thai society. In this study, I expect to find the attitudes of migrant workers from the countryside that move to the urban areas more compatible with change in social values than the people still living in the rural areas.

Among few researches done on migration and urbanization in Thailand, Mills (1999) conducts a research on young migrant workers in Bangkok. She suggested that when the young migrant workers are at home in the countryside they have to act cautiously and be concerned about their reputation. However in Bangkok where nobody cares about each other, romance and flirtation are the most important preoccupations for most migrant workers. "Many migrant workers view romance and flirtation as appealing ways to express their newly found *urban independence*. Parents and elders who might discourage such behavior in the village are far away, while the young migrants spend their days working and sharing place with people at their age having the same interests" (Mills 1999: 154-156).

In this sense, urbanization is an important variable to analyze the patterns of this change in Thai social values. It depends on which country or society you are looking at. This study indirectly contributes in this debate by strategically choosing respondents working in urban spaces.

3. Methodology

In pursuing this research on the real life context of migrant workers in Bangkok and their experiences of unmarried cohabitation, I wish to employ symbolic interactionism as my main theoretical framework. In viewing social interaction as taking place in terms of the meanings attached to actions and things, it takes a social constructionist epistemological approach (Bryman 2004: 544). This means that social phenomena are constructions of the human agency and explaining outcomes are best done through rigorous qualitative methodology. With respect to its ontological assumption, the project views that the existence of the real world is based on the *relational constructed* process of interaction of social actors.

3.1 Research Design

The research is both exploratory and explanatory. While it seeks to understand the contexts of migrant workers' situations and their life stories, it also attempts to give a comprehensive explanation to the growing numbers of people opting to choose unmarried cohabitation. To this end, this proposed study will use the case study research design because it will allow for an "in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context" (Yin, 2003). As a research strategy to this explanatory case, I will choose multiple methods, including in-depth interview and participate observation.

3.1.1 Informants

The group of people I chose as my informants are migrant workers in Bangkok. Although they are originally from other part of Thailand, they decided to move to Bangkok for working opportunities. The couples live together on a permanent basis in Bangkok.

The main data to this study comes from doing in-depth interviews with them while the supporting data are from conversations with people they know, such as friends, coworkers, or people that are from the same village in the countryside but living in Bangkok. In addition, my own observations are as valid as the other data that I have received. Overall, I have eleven informants, where seven (7) are women and four (4) are men.

3.1.2 Sources of Data

Before the interviews and participant observation were conducted, there are three preparatory steps that must be done. These steps were done to follow the ethical guidelines that social scientists adhere to do during research work.

Step 1: Seeking for informants

Part of the study is about sexual practice, which in Thai society is something embarrassing to talk about in public and sex behavior is too personal to discuss with others.

Hence, it was very difficult for me to look for cohabited couples to study on. However, I finally got some respondents through help from someone I know in my hometown (Sisaket) and it happened to be that some of my informants are acquaintances with me. Unfortunately, two of the couples I have had contact with broke up later even before the interview was done. The other couples have been contacted through my social networks in Bangkok. Since the beginning of August 2007, I had begun to look for people to interview. In introducing myself, I always mention that I am a Masters student in Asian Studies at Lund University in Sweden conducting my research on unmarried cohabitation in Thailand, specifically the case of migrant workers in Bangkok. Since this is a very sensitive topic in Thai society, several ethical considerations must be strictly maintained. After the interviews, all the data was and will be kept as secret files and no other researcher would be allowed to use them. Further, the recorded interviews will not be used in other research projects other than the thesis (except when quoting the transcriptions for further publications). With respect to the confidentiality clause, the researcher guarantees the interviewees that their real names and work place will be kept anonymous even in the manuscript. When the informants agreed to give the interview, I made appointments for interviews. During this period of time, I got rejected from some of the informants later on even though we had already made an appointment. In one incident, a woman cancelled an interview the day before the appointment because her boyfriend did not allow her. She is a well educated woman who cohabits with a singer in Thailand. I expressed my sympathy and understanding to her situation.

Step 2: Reaching informants by using the Snowball Sampling Technique

[2]This approach is applied to social science research with no sampling frame, that is, data to be gathered are sensitive and where respondents are difficult to get in touch with (Bryman 1999:242). With this approach, I made initial contact with the small group of people who were relevant to the project either as respondents or contacts to the respondents. Once they felt comfortable with me through the meetings and conversations, I asked them to introduce me to people who could be probable respondents or just knowledgeable people on the topic. For

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[2] Examples include studies on marijuana addiction/drug use (Becker 1963), self-defined vegetarians in UK (Beardsworth & Keil 1992), and a sample of British visitors in Disney theme parks (Bryman 1999:242).

instance, Joy and Ped are people from Sisaket. When I asked Joy if there was anyone I could conduct further interviews, Joy introduced me to Oum, Joy's coworker. While Ped introduced me to Wan, who is also from Sisaket.

Step 3: Study the informants

In this study, informants are the ones who opened my vision. They gave me a chance to understand the truth in the society that is waiting for someone to find out. So they are the most important actors in my research. Given this enormous chance to document their situations and generate ideas to explain social phenomena like cohabitation, there are responsibilities and research ethics that must be strictly followed. I guarantee the informants that they can completely put their trust and sincerity on me. Since informants may constantly worry about their reputation throughout their lives, the research has to keep all identifiable information in secret. Even though some of them have told me that it is ok to reveal their names and other information, I still think the thesis is not the proper place to do so. Hence, in this thesis, I use fake names and carefully give information for analytical purposes. The readers will not know who I am talking about in this research, while the informants instantly know that I am talking about them. Unlike the conventional detailed and in-depth case studies, this study deviates in the sense that it only provides an overall image of the phenomenon.

3.2 Methods in Data Gathering

I set up interview appointments from October to November 2007. Unconventional incidents also led me to getting more respondents. I found informants from the construction workers' camp located on the center of Bangkok, my apartment was close to the camp so I passed through it everyday. One day in October, I walked to the camp and introduced myself to a lady who owns the grocery shop there. She eventually got me two more women as respondents. The first time I went there, people in the camp were lurking around and eavesdropping. I asked a woman in the camp to find some men whom I can interview. She said it would be very unlikely. I tried to ask some of the men myself but was refused with some ungentlemanly comments. A woman in the camp said they were afraid to give the interview

because they were all losers and could not support a family not to mention their drug abuse problems.

I did interviews in several places. For instance, Oum who works at a golf course with Joy had to be interviewed while she was working. In some cases, I went to the informant's apartment seeing them with their partner and interviewing both of them in a day. However, it is important not to interview them at the same time as this might affect the responses of the informants. We went outside the room to talk and let the other half stay in the room.

In the beginning of the interview, I observed if the informants felt relaxed or stressed. In the first meeting, I did not go on to details. Most of the time, I simply ask general questions and then allow them to tell their own stories. However, most informants did not like this approach; they would rather have me asking questions so they know what to talk about. Hence, the questions were about how they met their boyfriend/girlfriend, how long they have been together, and the way they developed the relationship. Despite these questions, I intended not to go any further into details.

Therefore, the technique I used to gather the data in this study was *sociological interview*. It is the simplest and most powerful technique that sociologists use to understand human behavior. It is not only that a person asking question and the other answering it. Rather, it is two or more people being enthusiastic and open-minded in knowing and understanding the experiences of life of each other (Fontana and Frey 1994: 361). In order to get into a human being's world, the researcher has to attempt to interact with the interviewee, making them trust, and try to put our feet in their shoes (Davidson & Layder 1996: 245-247).

As a method to get the multiple truths out of the informants' life experience, I use the *semi-structured interviews*. I prepared the questions before the actual interview, but at the same time, I gave room for flexibility, by asking further questions or omitting others after hearing their answers.

Since this is a sensitive topic, the proper sociological approach is to use the informal interview. This refers to two people having a conversation, exchanging ideas and life experiences of each other, and learning from individual social contexts. While I asked questions, the informants were free to ask back and expected me to equally give honest answers. We share feelings and ideas. The amount of information I can acquire in an interview also depends on the environment while I am doing interview. There is no time limit or a set of questions as interview limitations (Bryman, 1999). It may take only one question to get the answer from someone but may take several questions to get the same answer from another. In one case, I only conducted a one-time interview because the person was very talkative and very open. In many cases, it takes a few times meeting to get all the answers I am seeking for.

Furthermore, part of the interview was about sex behavior so most of the time I used one-to-one interview because informants might get embarrassed if we had the third person during the interview. If the couples were together I would only ask questions about their life in general and tended not go deep into sensitive questions because it might make them feel awkward and the answer I get might not be the honest ones. To get the honest answers, I asked the sensitive questions with the couples when they were alone later. This required me to promise them that I would not tell their partner whatever we talk about.

Once I acquired general information about the interviewee, I prepared the in-depth interview for deeper information later. The questions changed according to situation and the interviewee. For example, if the interviewee was a woman, I had to make her trust me by saying something like "I understand you; I know what you mean because I am a woman too". To make them feel relaxed, if the interviewee is older I call myself "Nu" (younger sister) and call her/him "Pee" (older sister/brother). If the interviewee is a man, I tried to be careful to keep the distance so it would not create any problem later on.

Some insights in the study have also been acquired through *participant observation*, which is an important anthropological method to gather data in the fieldwork. Participant observation is not only *watching* but researchers have to use all the senses they have to get the data. There are three ways to employ participant observation in a case study research design.

First, researchers ought to pay attention to the physical environment of the informant as it contains objects that may signify meaning to the lived experiences of people, such as lifestyle and social predisposition indicated by clothing and house. Second, researchers must also observe the interaction process of the informant and the other people surrounding him/her. This gives real-life context to the communicative process occurring between actors. Finally, researchers need to pay attention to nonverbal behavior, such as body language, and verbal behavior that would indicate emotions of informants (Bailey 1996: 65-71). Before using the recorder, I asked the informants if they are comfortable with it. During the interview, I observed what kind of voice tones they used, whether they spoke loud or low, the kind of face reactions they had, and their body language when their partners are around.

Hence, this study used two strategies, which are in-depth interviews and participant observations. Each research methodology has strength and weakness that can support each other. Despite the increasing popularity of this set up, it still remains difficult to get more informants. This can be attributed to the limited time period of the study as well as the difficulty to get people to talk about this topic in Thai society.

In the data gathering period, the number of times an informant was interviewed was uneven. Once I had transcribed and translated my initial raw data (first interviews), I checked my interview questions again to see what have been left behind and scheduled another interview with them. Most questions here simply look at background of the informants. The second interview probed deeper into the topic due to the established connection between myself and the informants. Sensitive issues were discussed and I attempted to do both participant observation and interview. Finally, the research then put the social construction of living together in the broader context of Thai society, particularly migration and urbanization.

4. Characteristics and Background of Informants

While the family, educational system, and mass media generate social practices that lead to increased pressures to marry, the informants still reconsidered cohabitation as an option. Couples know what kind of reactions they will get before they cohabit with their

partners. Not to mention that in Thailand, "there is no legal protection for cohabitants to claim their rights regarding financial provision, both during cohabitation and at termination" (UNpress, January 29, 1999). To understand the meaning of living together from the migrant workers' perspectives, I carefully examined their autobiography to find out what socio-demographic factors influence their decision and behavior. Through their profiles, I can acquire greater understanding of the individual-level decision making toward cohabitation. Underneath the everyday life interaction of individuals, knowing his/her background makes me see the context thoroughly. The first step of the case background is about general information such as age, occupation, education, hometown, and their love experience in the past, which is summarized in Table 1 and Table 2:

Table 1: Female Informants

Name	Age	Hometown	Education	Occupation	Love Experience	Cohabitation Experience
Gan	36	Sisaket	Senior High.	Administrator	Yes	No
Joy*	30	Sisaket	Jonior High.	Caddy Golf	Yes	Yes (divorced)
Kwang	25	Sisaket	Senior High.	Sale Person	Yes	No
Gade	15	Kampangpet	Junior High.	Construction Worker	Yes	No
PaaDang	37	Sakolnakhon	Elementary School	Construction Worker	Yes	Yes (divorced)
Oil*	25	Saraburi	University	Customer Service	Yes	Yes
Oum	28	Supanburi	Junior High.	Receptionist	Yes	Yes (divorced)

Table 2: Male Informants

Name	Age	Hometown	Education	Occupation	Love Experience	Cohabitation Experience
Ped	36	Sisaket	Senior High.	Messenger	No	No
Sam*	25	Ayuthaya	University	Seeking Employment	Yes	No
Ple*	21	Roi Ed	Junior High	Waiter	Yes	No
Wan	36	Sisaket	Junior High	Administrator	Yes	Yes (divorced)

Note * Joy and Ple, Oil and Sam are couples. Name to put here are given name by me according to the research ethic and in order to protect them from any harm.

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The background of informants of both men and women are not so different from each other. Except for Gade who is only 15, the rest of the people are between ages 21-37. Since all of them are from the rural and have sought employment in Bangkok, they have lived away from their parents and family members. It can be argued that living far away from family and friends left in the countryside may lead to unmarried cohabitation. However, it cannot be concluded that 'living far away from home' is the main factor that makes one cohabit with one's partner, but rather distance makes it easier to make the decision to cohabit. However, in the case of Ple and Sam whose family is a few hours from Bangkok, they still cohabit with their female partners with the knowledge of their parents. They aspire for freedom, which cohabitation offers as it serves their interests without the automatic responsibilities of marriage.

I asked my informants if they had lovers before cohabiting with their current partner and if they could define the meaning of 'lover' in the zone of relationships. It seems that being lovers mean two persons agreeing to have a commitment, and not an unserious immature relationship. Interestingly, most of the informants have had lovers before their current partner. Many got married and divorced while Ped is the only one whose relationship can be considered as his 'first love'. Hence, the conventional advice of the elder generation "saving virginity for marriage" does not apply to this set of people. Even Gade, who is only 15, before cohabiting with her current partner, had a few boyfriends before meeting him. Further, most of them have a quite positive thought about love. Apart from loving their family members, loving their partner is caring, understanding, taking care of each other.

Another life experience is cohabiting; I asked my informants if they ever cohabited with someone before their current partner even for a short period. The finding is not so different between men and women. Women that cohabited with someone before, 3 of them got married and divorced. Oil is the only one who had cohabitation experience without getting married. Four out of seven women used to live with a man before moving in with their current partner.

In the case of men, only Wan was ever married and divorced. The rest never had cohabitation experience. Even though men never cohabited with their previous girlfriends, they all had sex with them. Unlike women, some of them such as Gan and Kwang (two women

from Sisaket) claimed they never had sex with their previous boyfriend before their current one. They have said the same thing that it was because their previous boyfriends are men from their hometown. It is normally like that with a dating couple in the countryside, they only date each other without having sex. I will point out the interesting part of cases that ever cohabited before:

Joy used to be married before cohabiting with her current partner. She has two children with her ex-husband. She explains that they broke up due to the lack of communication and misunderstanding within their marriage. When she met a new man at work at the sewing factory a few years ago, she divorced her ex-husband to be with the new man. She moved in to live with him but they broke up later. Right now she has been living with Ple, her current boyfriend for about two years. She hopes that the relationship will last and she can remarry him.

PaaDang once was married to a man when they were both young. It was an arranged marriage by her parents. She said her family was poor so they wanted her to marry him because his family was richer. By that time, his parents just came back home from working in Singapore, they had been working over there and came back with a lot of money to build the house and start a shop in their hometown. She said she was too young to deny it so she married him and had one child with him. He was violent with her so later on she divorced him because she could not bear him anymore.

Oum was married to her ex-husband and had a child with him. She divorced him due to his unfaithfulness. He cheated on her over and over again but she could bear it until he was the one that left her. Her partner today is her ex-husband's in-laws. They were living in the same house for years when they were in-laws of the same family. When they both divorced, they got together. However, she said she does not care much about men anymore since she broke up with the father of her child. If it is unbearable to live with someone, she will not hesitate to leave him.

Oil cohabited with her ex-boyfriend since they were in the university. They studied together and she moved in to live with him in his parents' house in Bangkok. Oil claims she loved him so much that she always felt jealous at what he did. She always thought what he was doing was cheating. So they fought a lot and after that she realized that he did not love her anymore so they broke up and she moved out of his parents' house.

Wan was married to a woman from his village and had a child with her. Later he moved to Bangkok to work and met his current one there. He said he was so young when he was married to his ex-wife. When he went to Bangkok to work he felt that they grew apart. He did not feel like he loved her the way he used to be. When he came back home every time people in the village will talk about him leaving his ex-wife to another woman. It is the main reason he did not want to go back there even though his mother is still living there. He is still supporting his child with the ex-wife financially although his ex-wife remarried with another man which is something unusual in Thai society.

5. Meaning Giving and Their Explanation

5.1 The meaning of living together

In this study, I start from reaching the meaning of living together of migrant workers in Thai society, whether it is *a prelude to marriage* or an *alternative to marriage* or even another meaning altogether. While the migrant workers explain the meaning of living together in various ways, there are some common themes that point to *shared meaning* of living together.

Female

Most female informants see living together as an expression of love to their man with an expectation of marriage in the distant future, except PaaDang and Oum. PaaDang who lives with her boyfriend because she loves him, thinks she is too old for marriage. Oum who used to want to marry her boyfriend, but due to constant delay of wedding planning, she has lost faith in her boyfriend and refuses to get married anymore.

Paadang: "Marriage is not important to me anymore. Out of a hundred couples, there may be two or three that do everything traditionally. I am not just talking about marriage. It's very difficult to find virgin women these days"..."I don't think cohabitation allows women to be taken advantages of. Let's think about it. Men don't have to go after women, nowadays. It's the women who go after men. Think about it, little girl. Nowadays, just be able to take care of oneself is good enough".

Oum: "No, I am not going to marry him anymore. Well, before cohabitation, he used to talk about us getting married quite often. However, he stopped talking about it anymore after we live together. And I don't want to remind him of it because I think we are both adults. If he does not want to marry, then so be it."

The rest of the women consider cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, that is, a stage that either terminates or eventually is transformed into a legal transitional marriage (Macklin 1983; 1980). Despite the initial reasons for moving in together, unmarried cohabitation eventually does not go against Thai social norms as most of my female informants still want to marry their partner eventually, even in the cases of ones that used to get married.

In Gade's case, she got pregnant and decided to move in with her boyfriend to save her family's reputation. As expected, her boyfriend promised marriage later when they have enough money. She explains, "My boyfriend and I talked about marriage but his family said we had to wait until we have some money". In this way, family pressure has influenced their decision to move together. Another case is Gan's experience, marriage has been planned to follow after on years of living together just to please her parents and follow the custom. The following illustrates the effect of family pressure to decision-making: "My parents argue it is my decision because I am already an adult. However, they suggest I should do it according to tradition. They also said you should get married when you are ready. However, we cannot get married right now because we are not ready yet. We need the money to get married, dowry, wedding ceremony and all that". In effect, cohabitation is a means to the end. Marriage remains to be a strong social institution that influences family traditions and consequently social practices in Thai society.

Joy, same as Paadang and Oum, has been married once. However, she differs from them in that she wants to get married later when she and Ple have enough money saved. She says, "We have thought of getting married but we do not have enough money yet." However, her boyfriend contradictory thinks that he does not want to get married.

Kwang thinks that living with her boyfriend makes them understand each other better than before and they have plan to marry each other. Kwang narrates, "The longer we live together, the more he understands me. At first, he did not really understand what I wanted. But later on, we talked about what we want, and there has never been any problem. He adjusted himself much better"… "I will keep the baby if I get pregnant. I have talked about this scenario with my boyfriend. We have been together for quite a long time and plan to marry anyway. If I become pregnant, we would marry a little sooner". Oil also thinks that cohabitation for her is like a trial, "I think it is good that we live together before marriage so we can learn about each other first if we can live together for the rest of our life or not. Apart from sex, it also makes us to be very close to each other".

Male

The men's cases are different. Most of the men prefer cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, *"a rejection of marriage as an institution, and/or cohabitation as a true alternative"* (Macklin 1983; 1980). For instance, Ped has been living with his girlfriend for 12 years, with a child together. Marriage to him is not important as long as both of them understand each other; he says, "I don't think marriage is important. Understanding each other is more important." Supported by Ple, he does not think marriage is important to him since he is happy with his life right now although Joy wants to get married. Ple says, "I don't think it is important, I am happy right now".

Wan was married once but he has not married his current girlfriend whom he lives with for 16 years and has 2 children together. His previous marriage has affected his decision not to re-marry, "I don't think I will marry my girlfriend in the future. I was married once; I don't want to do it again." Only Sam takes cohabitation as *a prelude to marriage* (he holds the same

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principle as his girlfriend, Oil). He says, "living with Oil for me is like a trial. Before we fought a lot, right now we don't fight that much because we know each other better than before. Also if I didn't live with Oil I wouldn't know that she loves me this much."

Based on these interviews, there are two meanings of cohabitation in Thai society. Most of the women consider it as a prelude to marriage, which is supported by Carl Ridley et. al. (in Berardo 1998:118). He found out in this study that in cohabitation, women are most likely to want marriage more than men. In the cases of men, most of them consider cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. They do not think marriage is more important than two people understanding each other. Interestingly, people that take cohabitation as an alternative to marriage are older than 28 years old (accept Ple), Paadang, Wan and Ped are older than 36 years old. It maybe the case that following social norms of marriage in Thai society makes it difficult to confirm, wherein the men have to give money to women's parents, a tradition called *dowry money*. Hence, people cannot get married easily when they do not have that financial stability for the dowry and wedding ceremony.

With regards to the degree of seriousness in the relationship, the interviews sought responses to questions, such as "what would you do if you accidentally got pregnant; will you keep the child; or "who is taking care of the money? Some of the women would keep the child and refused to do abortion, but some women responded the opposite. Paadang and Oum said they are too old to raise a child since they already have their own child with their ex-husbands. Oil said she would do it because she is not ready to have a child yet as she has just graduated from university and just has started work. On the question "who is taking care of the money?", almost all women did (except Oil and Sam). In Thai society, if the man allows the woman to take care of the money, their relationship is getting serious. It is a role in a relationship that the couples are serious about it. Apart from that, the longevity of relationship matters. This is demonstrated by the men who have been living with their girlfriends for a long time. In Ped's and Wan's case, they moved in with their girlfriend when they were still young and they have been living together with their girlfriends for more than 10 years and with children.

In comparison to Mukeaw's findings (2000), these groups are more mature and financial capacity to make decisions on cohabitation. Since they belong to the working section of society, they can take care of themselves with higher levels of financial independence than the university students. It can be argued that more people in Thailand see cohabitation as a new lifestyle, but it does not necessarily mean it is replacing marriage as a social institution.

5.2 Reasons of moving in together

Reasons for Female

From the interviews, three common reasons persist as to why the women decided to move in with their boyfriends, which gives us greater understanding of the meaning of living together better**.**

(1) *Desire for partnership (a way not to lose direction, sense of insecurity, love, etc)*

Most of the female informants used to be married but got divorced. As such, this kind of experience makes it easier for them to cohabit than a virgin woman. From the interviews, they seem to imply that they have nothing to lose and no reputation to protect. Oum is the one who decided to cohabit with her boyfriend because she felt like she needed someone to rely on and be with her, as she says, "he promised me a better life and he is a hard working man".

For Paadang, love is still the main reason. She told me that the only reason that makes her move in with her boyfriend is her unconditional love: "Why do I cohabit with my current boyfriend? It's not about lust. It's more likely love. To tell you the truth, I love him. Contrary to my ex-husband, it was an arranged marriage by my parents"… "I have a rice field at my hometown. But I left everything over there to come here and stay in the construction workers camp with someone I love. I'm telling you the truth"**.** Paadang got married first time with a man from her hometown when she was only 15 years old, and this maybe the reason why she is running after love right now at 37.

Gan met her boyfriend from the internet. Her boyfriend is an elementary school teacher in the northeastern part of Thailand and is the most well educated of all informant's partner,

which is why she is proud of him. Her main reason is love and the fact that she thinks she is getting too old.

Oil wants Sam to move in to live with her at her place because she is a very jealous person, "because Sam had an accident at work, I asked him to stay at my place so I can take care of him. Actually, it is because I am so addicted (as someone is addicted to drug) to my boyfriend and that's why I wanted him to move in. My mom did not like him in the first place, but now she changed her mind. Sam is such a nice guy".

Moreover, like the university students in Mukaew's study, economic stability remains an important factor. The couples want to save expenses, especially in housing. For them, it is better to move in and pay the rent for one room rather than paying the rent for two rooms, apart from saving money on other things such as transportation, food, etc.

(2) *Wanting a more serious relationship*

A woman thinks her boyfriend is sincere with her and therefore she decides to move in together. In this sense, there is greater sense of trust and sees living together as a way to deepen their relationship.

Joy decided to move in with her boyfriend not only to have a more serious relationship, but also to reduce the chance of him having an affair. She says, "If we are not cohabiting, my boyfriend may feel lonely and could seek out another girl"…"Cohabitation also helps you prevent misunderstanding because we have times to explain ourselves all the time. The chance of having an affair is possible but much less".

(3) *Social Pressure*

In comparison to Western societies, Thailand like other Asian societies is a very conservative society in terms of social norms related to marriage, courtship and relationship, wherein sexual practices has always been considered a social taboo. Gade cohabited with her boyfriend because she is pregnant when she is only 15 years old with very bleak future. She

narrates that her parents know she is cohabiting with her boyfriend and got pregnant, but her parents and her boyfriend have not yet met.

For Gade, "I decided to cohabit with him because he is the father of my child, I am serious with him". Because she is very young and never had sex with any of her ex-boyfriends, she lost her virginity to her current boyfriend and she faults herself for not knowing how to use birth control. When she got pregnant and decided to move in with him, she is expecting that he will marry her in the future provided they have enough money for the wedding ceremony.

Asked whether they are contented, most female informants felt good to have moved in with their boyfriends. Only Gade and Oum felt bad and regretted it, in which Gade cohabited with her boyfriend due to pregnancy and Oum desired for security in life. As Gade responds, "I would prefer to live separately because we have not married, other people would think of us in a bad way. I prefer the relationship before cohabitation. If I could turn back time, I would not cohabit."

I also asked my female informants to compare their relationship before and after moving in. While the rest think their relationship is better than before moving in or at least remain the same, only Oum and Gade think their boyfriends treat them worse than before. Oum's boyfriend did not give her attention as much as before while Gade's boyfriend is more violent with her, "he is not gentle with me anymore". He proves it by his behavior while I was interviewing Gade at the construction camp. I asked Gade how long did it take since they date until they decided to cohabit, her boyfriend who was around us said "we slept together the first day we met".

Reasons for Male

For my male informants, there are three primary reasons in committing unmarried cohabitation.

(1) *Desire for Partnership*

Most males expressed the feeling of being in a relationship as best realized through cohabitation: a man wants to move in with his woman because she is the one that makes him feel the warmth and love, she understands him the most, and she makes him feel happy to be with her. In practical sense, a man wants someone to take care of his life: do the housework, take care of him and the household (holding money matters).

Ped describes his situation, "I thought I was getting old. I met my girlfriend and I felt like she was the one for me. I did not want to be alone anymore. Before cohabiting we only met outside. But when we cohabit, we are together all the time. I wanted to have a family. So I decided to cohabit with my girlfriend." The same feeling of emotional investment can be found in Ple's response: "Living alone can be lonely sometimes. Living with Joy I have someone to talk to, even though sometimes I lack freedom but living with her is like I have a close friend with me all the time." Wan narrates his story, "why do I live with her? I had a wife while I was seeing my current girlfriend. She was someone that I would leave my wife for. You know I got married when I was so young and I was living in Bangkok while she was in Sisaket. I was lonely."

(2) *Saving money*

Both men and women see the financial advantage of moving in together. Ple thinks, "Since we have been living together, we are able to save some money. She does all the housework, I do not have to do anything at all. If I live alone, I would use all the money. Even if I make 40000 baht a month, it would be all spent."

(3) *It is what their woman wants*

While it maybe ironic that the men tend to dominate the relationship, they are sometimes driven to move in for the sake of their partner's wishes. Sam reckons, "It's what Oil wants. She told me to move in with her; if I don't live with her she will be angry. So I thought ok I live with her just to make her happy". Based on these reasons, it can be said that the men have been responding to the needs and demands of their partners. In the process of interaction, they learn about the behavior, lifestyle, and problems of their partners. This is what I mean by social construction of meaning work: people act upon their motives based on the social

environment, their interaction with other social actors, and the rational calculations they have in their minds.

5.3 The Social Construction of Living Together in the Thai Context

When a man and a woman decide to live together without marriage in Thailand, they understand their actions in relation to what is perceived "acceptable" behavior in society. Through socialization process, they realize the expectations society has set to them. Cohabitation is wrong according to two Thai social norms. First, they engage in a sexual relationship without marriage, in spite of sexual practices is being directly linked to marriage. Although biologically they are ready to have sex at their ages, having sex without marriage is unconventional and directly offends Thai sensibilities. Moreover, Thai society has double standards with sexual practices, wherein society tends to criticize women's sexual behavior more than men as if there is nothing wrong if men have the same sexual behavior (Intrajit & Krinchai 1998). Second, living together without marriage breaks the social norms, which constitute the legal and social policies of Thai society. A man and a woman must agree to live together only when they get married. This entails having a wedding ceremony to announce it to society and a legally binding contract through a marriage paper. These norms show their respect and responsibility to each other.

Hence, living together without marriage is considered deviant behavior in the eyes of the people. This project shows that people act to what they perceive as the primary truth of society, it being diverse and complex. The relationship of members of society cannot be strictly controlled. The view of what is acceptable is built up and changed through the dynamic process of interaction. The set of regulations and societal expectations are only guides in the process of human interaction. Social norms and rules do not control human behavior, rather, they change and are subjected to a negotiation process among social actors. Hence, the rules are reconstruction of human interactions more than passive expectations of society[3]. As in

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[3] For instance, a factory may have the rule playing music while working is not allowed but workers negotiate their position of being able to produce good work and listening to the music at the same time. The factory board allows them to have music on but in moderate manner. As long as the work runs good and the factory achieves their gold, all restrictions can be negotiated (Morgan 1975 in Mains 1977).

migrant workers' case of living together without marriage, the social restrictions and social norms of having sex before marriage and living together without marriage are re-negotiated at the microcosms of society. They claim of making the right decision even though it is against social expectations. They believe on their maturity to make their own decisions and that they are ready to take responsibility of their own behaviors. They do not see anything wrong with it as long as it is not something illegal to do. They work and they can take care of themselves in addition to feeding their families back in the countryside. At the personal level, they act on the basis of resisting against social norms and behaviors which they deem pass unfair judgments on their choices.

The workers know their behavior is deviant from social norms. From the symbolic interactionism's point of view, the actor anticipates and estimates others' behavior. In this same process, the other social actor will also anticipate and estimate their behavior to see how to behave in society, where the process of role takes place. Human beings take others' perspectives toward him/herself and the creative imagination allows humans to see the other way around: if other people were themselves, how they would deal with the situation? When workers perceive the *social reaction* on them in a negative way, they must find a way to rectify their behavior. Humans are social by nature; to interact with other people in society is very important in one's life. Since it is a process of active and passive responses, individuals make a decision whether to conform or go against these set rules, which explains why workers need to think of social reactions.

In this study, it is important to understand social reactions by (a) other people in society in general and (b) their family and friends. They need to have an explanation of their deviant behavior to society and a justification of their right to do it. While they argue that they can live their life even though their behavior is unacceptable in the society, they have different explanations to family and friends by anticipating their reaction when they know the truth.

5.3.1 Explanation to society

There are some people in Bangkok that the cohabitants have to interact with directly or indirectly. The cohabitants realize their behavior does not follow the society expectation. So they must have a way to keep their relationship with other people in society whom they interact with so that it fulfills the interaction process. I follow the *accounts idea*[4] of Scott and Layman (1990: 46-42). While the worker cohabitants realize their deviant behavior, they negotiate their belief system and think of their behavior as reasonable enough to be accepted. For instance, they are adults working and supporting themselves, with a mature mind to know that a sexual practice is a natural human activity.

Female

Oum gives explanation to society that she moved in with her boyfriend because she was young. If she could turn back time she would take the opposite path. However she does not think it is something very wrong since she is not hurting anyone. Gan gives the same idea as Oum, where she thinks of herself as mature enough to be responsible for her own life. As Gan said, **"**if we do nothing wrong or hurt anyone. I don't think it is wrong"… **"**I also think I am old enough to make my own decision. I can differentiate reasonably between appropriate and inappropriate things to do. I am a grown up who is working and responsible for my own life"

Joy reminds us of the changing social values brought about by the demographic changes in Thai society, "in our society, the elder do not accept cohabitation. However, many people do accept nowadays especially people in our generation. The public is accepting cohabitation more and more. If you are a good person, you work hard and do not depend on others. You are doing fine, that should not be a problem for me". On the other hand, Kwang raises the issue of

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[4] "There are in general two types of accounts: excuses and justifications. Either or both are likely to be invoked when a person is accused of having done something that is "bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous possible ways, untoward." Justifications are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it. Thus a soldier in combat may admit that he has killed other men, but deny that he did an immoral act since those he killed were members of an enemy group and hence "deserved" their fate. Excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility" (Scott and Layman 1990: 42).

privacy, "I didn't kill anyone. I thought cohabitation was embarrassing before but then my thought has changed. People don't care about that anymore. It becomes personal matters". Oil thinks she has the right to do what she wants regardless of how bad it looks at society.

Male

There is gender bias with respect to perceptions of cohabitation among men: while it is bad for females, men are acceptable to cohabit. It is good that a man can cohabit with a woman before marriage. On the other hand, they think it is bad for a woman since it is a disadvantage for her life.

Ped responds, "I do agree. Women face disadvantages when it comes to cohabitation. It is wrong especially for women to live with men before marriage. People in society will give them a bad look, thinking they are bad women. But for men it's ok. We do not have to face that social pressure." Ple agrees with this comment, "I don't think it's embarrassing to cohabit. Not for me, I am a guy so I think it is ok".

Wan thinks cohabitation is good for a couple who wants to see if they can live together or not before deciding to get married, but he will not agree if his daughter will move in with a man. He thinks it is bad for a woman to move in. Sam concurs, "It is bad for a woman but it is fine for a man. It is difficult for a girl to find a new boyfriend if they break up with their cohabited boyfriend. If the new guy knows that, it can be a problem. For me, I don't care. I don't care that Oil used to cohabit with her ex-boyfriend. I only care that she is a good person, but most males will not think of it this way."

In effect, they realize that the society does not have negative perceptions toward them cohabiting with their girlfriend. However, society frowns upon explicit display of sex before marriage or living with a woman before marriage. Despite going against these social norms, males care much less about societal perceptions.

5.3.2 Family's reaction

Family is the first institution where human beings pass on rules and social restrictions to human beings. Family is important because it influences the ways individual form their ideas, attitudes, and actions. Family members enforce disciplinary actions, pass on social values and norms, and socialize the individual as to the way they ought to respond to social pressures. The connection in the family is an essential factor drawing a person to decide whether or not to cohabit. Since parents are supported by their children once they work, they gain respect by their parents followed by independence.

Female's family

Most female informants informed their family after they cohabited with their boyfriend. Even though the family members accepted their daughters' marital status and respect them as adults, the female cohabitants themselves wish to get married with their boyfriends later to make their parents satisfied. Satisfaction here is measured by the degree of conformity of the daughters to traditions and norms related to sex and marriage. As Gan's experience illustrate, "my parents accepted my decision to cohabit because I'm an adult. But they suggest I should do it according to tradition. They also said you should get married when you are ready".

Further, the failure of the first marriage can lead to parents accepting their daughters choosing to cohabit. As Oum's case suggests, "yes, after sleeping with him, I introduced him to my family. My mother asked me "Are you sure about this? He is ex-husband of Mae" (Oum's ex sister in law). Then I explained to her that I liked him because he is a hard-working man. She agreed with me"… "No, she never wanted me to get married. I guess she understands I used to get married once. There's no point to do it again with a new man". This is the same case with Paadang. In Joy's case, her parents agreed with the set-up because they are being supported by Joy not to mention that they are not her biological parents.

Two of the female informants hid their relationship from their parents, Kwang and Oil. Kwang and Oil are from educated families and are well-educated themselves. However, Kwang thinks her mom should be fine with her cohabiting with a man. She might get upset but she will get over it. Oil hides her relationship from her father, only the mother knows. Her parents got divorced and her father is the one supporting her financially.

Male's family

All of the male cohabitants' families know they are cohabiting with their girlfriends. While some even told their parents before they cohabit, the others simply informed them afterwards. They live with their girlfriends before marriage without any pressure from the family, which explicitly demonstrates how the female cohabitants' family puts more social pressure. Ped's account is illustrative of this situation. "My mother knew later on after I cohabit 4-5 months. At first, she didn't know. She was surprised when I told her because before when she asked if I had a girlfriend, I said no. She did not say anything when she knew, she was fine with it".... "Her family wants us to get married but I don't have money yet and I think it's too late to do it now because we already have a child, too much responsibility. If I could turn back time, I wouldn't move in with my girlfriend. I would wait until we are ready to get married. I think it's bad. It is difficult to face your partner's family because you didn't get married. Nowadays, my girlfriend's family wants us to marry, but we cannot. Like I told you before, we don't have money. At this moment, I cannot look at my girlfriend's family in the eyes because I didn't marry her".

What I see in the relationships of the people to their partners' parents is the variety of ways their parents deal with them cohabiting. Being a woman makes them know that their parents cannot take them living with someone before marriage. Some female workers even hide their relationship from their parents because they do not want to upset them, therefore, financial capacity is important to make independent decision. On the other hand, it is easier for the male to inform their parents since the male have nothing to lose in this situation.

5.3.3 Friend's reaction

Cohabitation has nothing to do with the relationship between cohabitants and their close friends. Some friends also cohabit with their girlfriend/boyfriend. For instance, Joy and Oum are close friends and coworkers. They work together at a golf course but with different positions. Both of them cohabit with their boyfriends. Wan and Ped are also close friends from the same village and both of them cohabit with their girlfriends. Shared experiences between

individuals make it easier for social relation to be established, I asked my informants if there is any of their friends cohabited with their partner, all of them say "yes". Further, there is something interesting that I would like to point out. According to Ped and Wan, a lot of workers from Sisaket who live in their apartments cohabit with their girlfriends. After sometime, they will have this small wedding party where only close friends in Bangkok are invited, this of course without the knowledge of their parents in the countryside. As Ped makes the account, "the couples got married quietly. Nobody back home would know if they didn't tell. They just get married in Bangkok, only friends are invited to the party. It is only a small party most of the time and mostly, the parents knew afterward".

Cohabitation in Thailand is quite different compared to Western societies. While it is easy for Westerners to choose cohabitation or marriage, Thai people are normally compelled to undergo wedding ceremony. In most cases when the couple cannot afford to uphold the traditions such as dowry and wedding ceremony but are firm to stand by their relationship, they decide to go for cohabitation until such time that they are prepared to get married. There are likewise cases of women agreeing for cohabitation and not marrying eventually because time has passed for them that living together for a long time is enough proof of their commitment of each other. Hence, marriage loses personal meaning and this maybe a sign of erosion of the importance of marriage among people. However, this is not to say that marriage is losing relevance in Thai society. In fact, the interviews revealed that some people who had a failed marriage and divorced still want to get married in the future. Therefore, this social institution remains very powerful in dictating social practices and norms among Thai people. In this sense, it is too simplistic to compare cohabitation as mere alternative lifestyle in European/American with Thai contexts.

5.4 Cohabitation in Urban life

Thai people acknowledge cohabitation differently depending on which class or part of society they are from. From my own experience, Bangkok is seen as a big city where people are isolated from each other. People in Bangkok have high levels of individualism, as in other urban areas in the world. There is much regard to privacy and individual right to secrecy of

their activities. With the diversity of people living even within one apartment building in Bangkok, one cannot find out if those couples are married couples or cohabited ones unless there is personal knowledge of their situations. Urbanization contributes in this increasing level of individuation as people are becoming less sensitive to their environment, that is, city people do not stick their nose in others' business, in contrast to the way it is practiced in rural communities. For instance, the investigation of a murder within a household was known only until after a few years when one of the members of the family discovered it (Khaosod News, 31 October 2550).

Traditional societies keep social norms and practices of marriage and sex intact due to lack of pressures from people to challenge them. However, the urban setting captures the dynamic interaction of tradition and modernity, wherein urban life brings higher levels of individualism as compared to tightly knit rural communities (Veenhoven 1999:3). This is demonstrated by the experience of cohabited couples, where they engage in such taboo relationships because there is greater freedom from pressures and more independence due to their financial capacity and the chance to be away from parents and friends in rural community. As Mills says, "working in Bangkok offers young people the chance to pursue romance far from the watchful eyes of parents, neighbors, and other elders" (Mills 1999: 154). I asked my informants if it would be possible for them to cohabit in their hometown in the countryside. All of them say "no". For instant, Kwang says ""I think it's impossible for me to cohabit in my hometown. There are so many relatives and everyone share the family names. They would want me to get married first before moving in with my boyfriend. But over here in Bangkok, nobody knows me, nobody cares about other people business".

6. Conclusions

The project used symbolic interactionism as the major theoretical approach to explain how individuals provide meaning to the concept of *living together* in a society where social norms and practices on sex and marriage remain rigid and unchanged for a long time. In particular, the study finds out the various meanings of cohabitation in a specific demographic section of Bangkok. The research employed a combination of participant observation and in-

depth interviews of eleven informants, whose identities have been made anonymous for ethical reasons. Based on the findings, the research concludes that individuals do not necessarily aim to transform social relations and radically alter the existing social order. Almost half of these people have regretted moving in together and would have wanted a different path for their relationships. It may also be worth pointing that the spatial context matters in deciding to live together: where there are less pressures from the family and greater independence, there is higher probability of choosing to live in together despite defying social norms. In urban setting, it is easier for people to cohabit because it removes the pressure of marriage and sex since parents are far away.

There are two major findings in this study. Like in American and European societies, cohabitation is either a prelude to marriage or an alternative lifestyle. Furthermore, most couples still wish to have marriage afterwards, which means that they do not necessarily reject marriage as a social institution. The majority of my informants claimed that life companionship is motivated them to cohabit. However, Thai social norms and traditions such as the dowry money and big wedding ceremony need to be followed. Both these norms are not easy to comply given that not everyone can afford to have these traditions, which lead to couples engaging in unmarried cohabitation. In cases where couples do not want to get married anymore, it is because time has passed for them that their relationship is the proof of their love to society. Most females want to get married even though they have had divorce already and money is the major reason why they keep cohabiting with their partners, which ultimately shows that women have more social pressure to deal with when it comes to relationships in Thai society.

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Appendix

Interview Questions Guided:

1. Personal background

   - Age
   - Religion
   - Education (what kind of school you graduated from (school for boys/girls/both), level (high school/ university)
   - Career
   - Parent's education, Parent's career
   - Parent's marriage status (live together/divorced/deceased)
   - Have you ever had sex with your previous partner but didn't cohabit with him/her?
     (1)If no, what was the reason of you not moving in with that person?
   - Have you cohabited with another woman/man before?
     (1)If yes, how long time the relationship last?
   - How long time had you been dating before living together?
   - How long time have you been living together?
   - Why did you move in together?

2. Partner's background
   - Age
   - Religion
   - Education
   - Hometown

3. Parent's point of view
   - Do your parents know about you living together with your partner?
     (1) If yes, they do. What is their opinion?
     (2)If no, they don't. How can you hide it from your parents?
        (2.1) Do you think your parent can accept it? Why? (parent's reaction from the news)
   - Do your partner's parent know about you living together with your partner?
     (1) If yes, how did they know? Why?
     (2) If no. Why?

4. Friend's point of view
   - Do your friends know about your cohabitation?
       (1) If yes, what are their opinions about it?
       (2) If no, how can you hide it from them? And why?
   - Do any of your friends live together with their partner?
       (1) If yes, how many of them?
   - Does cohabitation makes you feel that you are different from your friends that   have living separately relationship?

        (1) If yes, why?
        (2) If no, why?

5. Activities
 - How many hours do you spend time together per day?
 - What activities do you usually do with your partner?
 - How do you divide housework (cleaning, laundry, cooking, dishes and so on)

6. Income and money management
 - How much do you earn a month?
 - How much does your partner earn a month?
 - Do you and your partner financially support your parent or any of your siblings?
 - How do you manage your expenditure?
   (1) You share everything or who take care of what?
 - Who is the person taking care of expenditure list below;
   (1) Room rent.
   (2) Food.
   (3) Other stuffs (what are they?)

7. Relationship
 - How often do you fight with your partner?
 - What is the main reason?
 - How did you solve the problem?
 - Do you have kids?
   (1) If yes, how many and how old is your kid?
   (2) If no, do you plan to have? Do you do birth control? Did you ever got pregnant? Or if you never get pregnant, how would you solve it (would you consider an abortion or adoption) if you did?
 - Can you compare your friendship between before and after cohabitation? Which one is better? Why?
 - What are the pros and cons of living together? How?
 - What do you think is the difference between cohabitation and married couples?
 - What is your opinion if your future wife/husband ever cohabited with someone else before you?
 - Do you think cohabitation affects female and male differently? How?
   (1) Advantages and disadvantages for male…..
   (2) Advantages and disadvantages for female….

8. Urbanization Part
 - Is it possible for you to cohabit with your boyfriend if you were living in your hometown in the countryside right now?
   (1) If yes, what about your parents, friends, and neighbors? What kind of reaction would you get from them?
   (2) If no, why?
9. Future Plans

- What are your future plans between you and your partner?
  - (1) No plan, because…..
  - (2) Plan to get married, when?
  - (3) other plans……..