

MATTHEW FENNESSY

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# MARRIAGE, MODERNITY AND “MANNER”

A BURMESE-BUDDHIST WOMAN’S AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY YANGON, MYANMAR  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT

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Picture of Chan Mya Nyein on the front page.

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*Matthew Fennessy*

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ABSTRACT

Despite a resurgence of academic interest in Myanmar since the "opening" in 2011, little research exists on the growing urban middle-class, and even less on women. This paper is an ethnographic portrait of Chan Chan, a "modern", unmarried 33-year-old middle-class Burmese-Buddhist woman living in contemporary Yangon. I examine how she conceives of agency, and produces herself as an agent. I then analyse how she seeks to carve out agentive spaces for herself while performing "appropriate" femininity from typically subordinate positions. To do this, I examine her practice in pursuit of her projects: in relation to me, to her parents, in her desire to marry, in her imaginations of a husband, and in her pursuit of a better rebirth. Contextualising Chan Chan as a subject in broader societal discourses, this paper throws light on how woman like her do life in contemporary Myanmar, in a time when established discourses on women's "high-status" are being increasingly challenged.

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# THANK YOU TO CHAN CHAN

*Without her generous cooperation, help, openness and honesty, this thesis would not exist*

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE USAGE

Words inside speech marks such as “leader”, “clever” and “honest” are terms which Chan Chan herself used. I have retained these not only in order to let Chan Chan herself speak, but because they (generally) appear to be common Burmese translations of local concepts. As these terms do not have adequate English translations and therefore should not be understood in standard English usage, I provide explanations how and when pertinent.

Citations and academic concepts also appear in quotations marks, in which case it is made clear by the accompanying source.

To avoid confusion, standard English terms which are important yet have questionable meanings in this context, such as ‘truth’ and ‘self’, are all marked in single quotation marks like ‘so’.

For Myanma and Pali words, I have used what appear to be the most common transliterations. No consensus has been reached as to how Myanmar words should be written in English.

Quotations from Chan Chan remain as true as possible to the originals while making them easily readable. As such, I have removed repeated words and pauses. I have also removed reinforcers (e.g. “ya”, “yes, and “uh-huh”) from me when they were not relevant. Occasionally words in brackets are added to Chan Chan’s quotations to clarify the meaning.

The use of cf. in citations in this document is intended as “See also”, not “Compare”.

## CHAN CHAN

*Chan Chan is a middle-class Burmese Buddhist woman. At the time I interviewed her in September–October 2014, the then 33-year-old was working as an accountant, translator and secretary. As was financially practical and socially appropriate for an unmarried woman, she lived with her younger brother and parents in an outer suburb of Yangon, Myanmar's former capital. She was the primary bread winner for her family, supporting her retired parents and, at times, her brother, who himself worked. She holds a Bachelor of Business Administration. She is fluent in Myanma, Chinese and English, and is also learning German. She is an intelligent, determined and goal-oriented woman.*



Chan Chan's facebook post after the first interview (27.9.2014).

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular perceptions in the West, Myanmar<sup>1</sup> was not a land stuck in time prior to the political and economic ‘opening’ of the country in 2011. Rather, Myanmar society has been in a state of profound change over the past 25 years (e.g. Skidmore 2005:4; Noack 2011:15). This is particularly so in Yangon, the country’s largest city and economic and cultural hub<sup>2</sup>. Yet little academic literature exists about how this on-going change has affected the lives of ‘ordinary’ people. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to contribute to a small but important conversation about how people, and women in particular, do ‘everyday’ life in contemporary Myanmar.

## 1.1 Contemporary Myanmar: A brief overview

Following the collapse of Burmese socialism in 1988<sup>3</sup>, and the annulled 1990 elections which would have seen them removed from the power, the military regime moved to selectively liberalize the economy (Skidmore 2005:10). Since then, Yangon has seen major infrastructure development, in particular, of roading, electricity and housing (Skidmore 2005:10), while industrialization on the urban periphery has seen an influx of rural poor to work the factories (Chaw Chaw 2003:203), a trend that has accelerated greatly since 2014 (Chan Chao Intl Co., Ltd 2015). Since 1990, Myanmar has seen the development of a very small but extremely wealthy elite, and the (re) emergence of a growing middle-class (Thant Myint-U 1.8.2014) in which Chan Chan is located socially. As new images and possibilities for consumption from abroad have become available, discourses about social and economic mobility have also become increasingly prominent (Noack 2011:141-7).

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<sup>1</sup> Since the military regime changed the name of the country to Myanmar in 1989, a number of governments and opposition groups have questioned its claims to legitimacy by, among other things, insisting on the calling the country Burma. Since the ‘opening’ of the country in 2011: a number of foreign governments, opposition groups and NGOs have adopted the name Myanmar. In fact, the name Myanmar has been used inside the country since independence. As one journalist said at an open lecture I attended in Berlin last year when asked how the country should be referred to: “We have more important things to worry about”. Most importantly, Chan Chan, as did most people I spoke to inside the country– both foreign and local – referred to the country as Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> Yangon’s population was 7.36 million in 2014 (Department of Population: Ministry of Immigration and Population 2014). It was the capital of Myanmar until 2007, when the regime relocated it to the new city it had built, Naypyidaw. With the parliament and ministry offices having been relocated, power is now split between Yangon and the new capital.

<sup>3</sup> Then Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948. It was a parliamentary democracy until 1962, when the military seized power. Military rule officially ended in March 2011.

In 2011, former military commander and then president, Thein Sein, set the country on a course of political, economic and social ‘transition’ which surprised local and foreign observers alike (e.g. Skidmore & Wilson 2012, 3–4). This has seen the return of a foreign-educated local elite and an influx of ‘expats’, as well as foreign capital, consumer products, rapid economic<sup>4</sup> and tourism growth<sup>5</sup>, liberalisation of the media, the signing of a ceasefire agreement with several (but certainly not all the major) ethnic armed groups, and the release of political prisoners (e.g. Skidmore & Wilson 2012, 3–4; Aung-Thwin 2014; Kyaw Hsu Mon 2014; Heijmans 2015; Lintner 2016; Aung Hla Tun 2015). In November 2015, the first democratic general election since 1990 was held, seeing the New League for Democracy (NLD), under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, win a landslide victory.

However, any suggestion of a straightforward “transition” toward democracy can be ruled out, as “this trajectory is not clear at all” (Leehey 1.8.2014). Initial hopes of fundamental change have been mitigated by events on the ground. These include the rise of a Buddhist nationalism and the persecution of the Muslim minority (and the Rohingya in particular), refusal to change the constitution to allow opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to become president, the imprisonment of journalists, union members, farmers, students and other protestors, continued land grabbing, labour disputes as well as continued fighting between the military and armed ethnic groups (e.g. Walton & Hayward 2014; Aung-Thwin 2014; Lawi Weng 2014; Hnin Yadana Zaw 2015; Kyaw Hsu Mon 2015; Al Jazeera 2015, Song 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly, after 50 years of military rule, it appeared (in 2014) that many people remained sceptical of a government made up of former military leaders in civilian clothing<sup>6</sup>.

In my experience, the changes which dominate the local and foreign media seem to be experienced by the majority of people in Yangon as distant, removed from their daily lives and struggles. Most people I spoke to seem to understand the post-2011 environment more as a continuation of a longer process of change rather than a radical shift, with the distribution of power and wealth remaining largely unchanged. In Yangon, the country’s new political and economic direction has been most evident in the city’s increasing traffic deadlock<sup>7</sup>, a continuation of spiralling food, rent and other commodity prices, and evidently, the possibility to openly criticize the government (Fennessy 2014).

## 1.2 Aim, questions and argument

In this political, economic, physical and social environment, middle-class subjects like Chan Chan negotiate complex sets of modernity, gendered, and nationalist discourses. These discourses gain resonance and power when articulated within an overarching framework of “meaning”: ‘true’ Burmese-Buddhism and “tradition”. These discourses are anything but static, coherent or unified, rather they are fluid, overlapping, complimentary, competing and contradictory.

Yet little academic literature exists about how this on-going change has affected the lives of ‘ordinary’ people in Myanmar. Even less has been written about women’s lives. From my experiences in Yangon in 2014, a general lack of knowledge about how ‘ordinary’

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<sup>4</sup> Economic growth was estimated at 7.8 percent for the 2013-14 financial year, and 8.5 percent for 2014-15 (Aung Hla Tun 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Official tourist arrivals went from under 800,000 in 2010 to over three million in 2014 (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2014).

<sup>6</sup> It seems likely that the actions of Thein Sein’s government in the weeks prior to the handover of power to the democratically-elected NLD at the start of February 2016 would have reinforced this image, with the parliament taking measures to maintain military control of major state producers, extend political immunity to the highest echelons, and grant themselves generous bonuses (e.g. Putz 2016). While excitement about and hopes for fundamental change under the NLD appear high, at the time of writing (January 2016), it remains to be seen how much power they will actually control, and how effective they will be.

<sup>7</sup> In 2011, the government reduced restrictions on new car imports. With sinking prices, it is estimated that the number of cars in Yangon doubled between 2007 and 2014 (Heijmans 2014).

people understand the world and practice in it is evident on the exploding NGO and 'expat scene'. This situation is not ameliorated by the lives 'expats' tend to lead, side-by-side, but rarely together, with locals. Yet this lack of knowledge, exacerbated by spatial, ethnic, sociocultural, economic and language segregation<sup>8</sup> has not stopped a number of expats – many of whom are in extremely powerful positions – from making startling generalizations and diagnoses about the country and people. In these discourses, the Myanmar people and "culture" are often dismissed as "stupid", "lazy", "backward", "incapable of learning", "unable to think critically", "superstitious", "ignorant", "needing education". Despite generally more nuanced understandings, at times I also heard similar narratives reinforced and repeated by local elites, including so-called "re-pats"<sup>9</sup>. These elites, especially given their ability to speak English, are powerful representatives of Myanmar "culture" in expat circles<sup>10</sup>.

Frustrated and disturbed by these simplistic, generalised, and arrogant assumptions<sup>11</sup>, I became increasingly fascinated by how Myanmar people understand their 'everyday' worlds and how they do life in them. In order to pursue this project, I made extensive diary notes about my relationships with local people, and conducted three extended interviews with Chan Chan. Prior to the interviews I developed a broad research question which would guide me throughout the interview, analysis and writing process, and which I attempt to answer in this paper. Namely,

To what extent do normative gendered, middle-class Burmese-Buddhist, modernity and "tradition" discourses offer Chan Chan the perceived (emic) and analytical (etic) agentive space to determine who she is, and what she does in life?

To approach this, I developed the following key sub-questions: What are her projects in life? How does she understand agency as a concept? How does she produce herself as an agent? How is her agency restricted in practice? How does she attempt to negotiate these practical restrictions?

In adopting an agency approach inspired by Sherry Ortner (1996; 1999; 2006) and Saba Mahmood (2005), I focus on how Chan Chan negotiates in different settings and relationships. In doing so, I reveal how she seeks to achieve her projects within the discursive frameworks (structures) which simultaneously construct her as a subject, while also restricting and making possible her agency and practice. Looking at Chan Chan's agency and practice reveals not only the specific strategies she uses to achieve her goals, but also helps reveal the complex of dynamic and competing discursive structures within which women like her do life. In other words, while this study is a snapshot of how one middle-class Burmese Buddhist woman does life in Yangon, it is intended to throw light on the life worlds of other women like her as well.

I argue that in producing herself as a highly agentive and socially appropriate woman, Chan Chan seeks to create the agentive spaces she deems necessary to pursue her projects. I reveal how this production of self is, in practice, undermined by the discursively constructed roles she is ascribed, and how and why, despite these barriers, she seeks to maintain an understanding of herself as highly agentive.

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<sup>8</sup> Predominantly white, 'expats' work primarily in business, for NGOs, as language teachers or as interns. Of the expats I met, few spoke Myanma. They primarily lived in apartments charged out at exorbitant 'foreigner' rents, rode taxis rather than buses, populated the city's expensive and therefore exclusive restaurants and bars. In short, they enjoyed the life that a Western salary and mastery of English allowed one in a 'developing' country.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign educated local elites who have predominantly returned since 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Western tourists, who are important in representations of Myanmar in the West, often repeat a different set of Orientalist narratives, representing the country as "authentic", "untouched", "unchanged for centuries", "traditional", full of "happy", "friendly" and "welcoming" people.

<sup>11</sup> While it may appear tempting to brand this a form of neo-colonialism, I find such a statement highly loaded and unnecessary. It also risks taking on one set of simplistic and over-generalized assumptions with another.

### 1.3 Relevant literature

To contextualise Chan Chan as a subject, I draw primarily on literature about Burmese-Buddhist, gender and class discourses in Myanmar, and on contemporary Yangon in particular. There is a dearth of recent anthropological sources on 'everyday' people's lives (e.g. Skidmore 2005:1-2; Noack 2011:17). This is perhaps not surprising given that the military regime closed the country to researchers when it assumed power in 1962, and only allowed highly restricted access from the mid-1980s. Since 2011, interest in and research on Myanmar has boomed across the academia. However, this surge in research is yet to lead to the publication of much new anthropological material relevant to this study. Nevertheless, some outstanding texts do exist. Georg Noack's (2011) *Local traditions, global modernities: Dress, identity and the creation of public self-images in contemporary urban Myanmar* provides an unparalleled wealth of data on contemporary discourses in Yangon. Despite the limited use of it in this thesis, the first edited anthropological volume to appear about Myanmar in 40 years, *Burma at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Skidmore 2005), has also greatly informed my understanding.

Several texts on popular Buddhist understandings provided invaluable information. Despite having conducted his field work in a rural village over 50 years ago, Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* (1982) remains unparalleled for the breadth and depth of data it provides. Given that his data is now so dated, I have attempted to correlate information taken from his works with other sources. A number of more recent articles have also proved invaluable, including Braun (2009), Brac de la Perrière (2009) and Schober (1995:2005). The 2007 book *The Teachings of the Buddha*, published by the Ministry of Information, may seem a questionable source from an academic standpoint. Nevertheless, it reinforces, clarifies and contextualises much of what Chan Chan told me, and appears to be largely representative of popular Burmese-Buddhist discourses<sup>12</sup>. A number of other texts on Burmese-Buddhist conjunctures proved useful, though these tend to focus on aspects somewhat removed from how people do 'normal' life, such as meditation movements (Houtman 1990; Jordt 2005, 2007), a Buddhist political imaginary and opposition to the regime (e.g. Schober 2005; Gravers 2012; Houtman 2005), and Buddhist nationalism (e.g. Walton and Hayward, 2014). As Burmese-Buddhist values are so important in shaping popular discourse, a variety of texts with seemingly unrelated themes also provided useful context, such as Michael Aung-Thwin's (2009) history of the state, Gilbert's (2013) paper on LGBT in contemporary Yangon, and books from local authors about Myanmar 'culture' (Khin Myo Chit 1995, 2014; Meiji Soe 2014) were also useful.

In relation to gender discourses, Tharaphi Than's (2014) groundbreaking *Women in modern Burma* proved particularly useful, as did the few other texts focusing on gender relations, particularly Mi Mi Khaing's (1984) *The world of Burmese women*, and the ubiquitous Spiro's *Gender ideology and psychological reality* (1997) and *Kinship and marriage in Burma* (1977). Chaw Chaw's (2003) article on women moving to Yangon to work in factories, as well as three masters theses from Myanmar students at Bangkok's Mahidol University (Chit Ko Ko 2007; Myint Moh Soe 2008; Ohnmar Aung 2005) provided excellent recent interview material about gendered discourses and the restrictions women face in Yangon today. Min Zin's (2001) magazine editorial about popular conceptions of *hpoun* was also important.

Perhaps (justifiably) fearing retribution from the regime, and often reinforcing discourses on Myanmar's moral supremacy, the works by Mi Mi Khaing (1984), Meiji Soe (2014), Khin Myo Chit (1995, 2014) provide valuable information, but paint an uncritical and rather romantic picture of Burmese 'culture'. Indeed, with the exception of some of the more recent academic sources, the authors I drew on generally fail to problematise the concept of Burmese 'culture' at all, representing it as static, fixed, coherent. The limited number of relevant, reliable and contemporary sources has made this study

<sup>12</sup> This is not surprising in light of the regime's strategy, particularly since 1990, to assume popular Burmese-Buddhist discourses in order to legitimate its rule.

more challenging, and the broader conclusions I have been able to reach somewhat more tentative. Of course, this lack of research also makes thesis, and hopefully a number of other works dealing with similar themes in the years to come, both more interesting and important in understanding how 'everyday' men and women like Chan Chan do life in contemporary Myanmar.

#### 1.4 Structure of this thesis

In the following chapter, I provide necessary background on the articulated approach to agency which forms the theoretical foundation of this thesis. In Chapter 3, I outline my research and analysis methodology. Following that, I locate Chan Chan as a subject, explaining popular Burmese-Buddhist and gender discourses, as well as her social location in contemporary Yangon. In Chapter 5, I briefly outline Chan Chan's mundane and supramundane projects, explaining how they are meaningful and appropriate to her as a subject, before illustrating how they are inextricably intertwined in one another. After that, I focus on the neo-liberal/Burmese-Buddhist conception of agency Chan Chan adopts, before expanding on her production of herself as a highly agentive and ethical woman, or a "leader", as she refers to herself. Chapters 7 and 8 are case studies on how Chan Chan attempts to convert her narrative production of herself into practice through negotiation and competition with other subjects, who are themselves pursuing their own projects. Chapter 7 focuses on her relationship with me, and illustrates how Chan Chan skilfully adopts power-filled roles as and when social appropriateness does not preclude it. Chapter 8 is divided into three parts. In part one, I focus on her contest with her parents, who want Chan Chan to stay at home with them and provide for them, rather than marrying. In part two, I look at the strategies she adopts to pursue her project of marriage while remaining a socially appropriate daughter and single woman. In part three, I look at how Chan Chan's paradoxical imagination of a future husband fits within naturalised conceptions of masculinity and femininity, as well as providing a strategy to counter her parents' objections to marriage. In Chapter 9, I look at the work Chan Chan performs on herself to be the type of woman she understands that she should be and wants to be (Mahmood 2005:30-1). I also demonstrate how being/becoming an ethical 'self' is the foundation of all her projects, and particularly her supramundane project, a better rebirth. In doing so, I investigate the logic which motivates her to work towards rebirth as a man. In Chapter 10, I reflect on issues of representation. In the final chapter, I summarise the key arguments in the thesis, before opening up a more general discussion about gender "equality" and contemporary modernities in Myanmar.

## 2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this thesis, I draw primarily on approaches to agency and gender outlined in the works of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Sherry Ortner (1996;1999;2006). While there are significant differences between their works, both anthropologists emphasise the importance of adopting an “approach” to, rather than a theory of, agency.

“(…) I insist that the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides. My argument in brief is that we should keep the meaning of agency open and allow it to emerge from ‘within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself’” (T. Asad 2003:78 cited in Mahmood 2005:34).

These approaches can be understood as a response to theories which have failed to let interlocutors speak for themselves, to reveal how they themselves understand agency, and how this translates into practice (cf. Ortner 1999:159). In omitting actors own voices and conceptions of agency, anthropologists have been guilty of assuming positions of definitive power and authority, as sole producers of truth about the other (Clifford 1986:6–11). Among others, Ortner (2006), Ahearn (2001) and Mahmood (2005) have been highly critical of perhaps the most common anthropological theories of women’s agency, that is, understanding agency as resistance. Such theories are not only analytical, but are also prescriptive projects about the way that women inside an imagined “global sisterhood” should resist the patriarchal structures which subjugate them (Mahmood 2005:10, 36). In such studies, authors have sought out “resistance” in efforts to support their own theory/agenda. This focus on women’s agentive resistance and subversion of patriarchal subordination has inhibited anthropologists from seeing and examining not only how women understand their own agency, but also how they practice it *inside* restrictive discursive frames (Mahmood 2005:14–5; Ahearn 2001:115–6). In essence, a focus on resistance flattens out, obscures, or simply ignores forms of agency which cannot be fitted into a prescribed model.

In this thesis, Chan Chan’s conception of agency and production of herself are essential to understanding her agency and practice<sup>13</sup>. These reveal that straightforward binaries of power and resistance are comparatively insignificant in both her conception of agency and her practice (e.g. Ahearn 2001:115–16; Mahmood 2005:14–5). Adopting an approach to agency which articulates Ortner and Mahmood’s conceptions allows Chan Chan to speak for herself, while providing me the analytical tools to make a broader range of interpretations and insights than would otherwise have been possible.

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<sup>13</sup> In this thesis, “agency” and “agentive space” are differentiated from acts themselves, which are referred to as “practice”.

## 2.1 The subject

Another major weakness of agency as resistance theories is that they necessarily assume the existence of an autonomous, pre-social subject with an innate drive for freedom; a subject who strives to break free from their invariably patriarchal chains of oppression (Mahmood 2005). Rejecting these models, the conceptions of the subject Mahmood and Ortner adopt are based in the paradoxical nature of the subject: “*Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*” (Berger and Luckman 1966:61 cited in Ahearn 2001:117: italics in original). While a number of differences in theories of the subject exist, leading proponents “see subjects as constructed by, and subjected to, the cultural and historical discourses within which they must operate” (Ortner 1996:1).

Ortner argues that while subjects are “(...) always culturally constructed and politically constructed” (1996:10), they are not mere robots, they are “active” and “intentional” in pursuing their projects (2006:134–6). The agentive space in which subjects pursue their projects actively and with intention is available within the very same discursive structures which construct them as subjects (Mahmood 2005:29)<sup>14</sup>. Agency and structure are not opposites. Rather, the individual subject’s agency is inherent within the structures they are created by and which they inhabit and negotiate. These structures, or discourses, provide “what might be called a range of possibilities for being and acting” (Zigon 2008:90)<sup>15</sup>.

## 2.2 “Meaning” and projects

Understanding the subject as constructed by, subject to and operating within sociohistorical discursive sets (Ortner 1996:1), it becomes apparent why and how Chan Chan’s life projects are appropriate to and make sense to her. While her projects are located in the discursive frames she inhabits, she makes them her own – she imbues them with “truth” and “meaning” – through her practice, through the work she does in pursuit of them (Ortner 1999:144–5).

“While Geertz uses the notion of meaning in a range of ways, it is arguable that his use of it in the context of religion colors his entire sense of what meaning means: it is a set of broad conceptions – about what the world is like, how it is put together, how human social beings should conduct themselves within it – and a complex of practices (“rituals”) whose effect is to imbue these conceptions with authority and truth” (Ortner 1999:145).

It is through the intentioned pursuit of her projects that one fills their life with “meaning” and “purpose” (Ortner 1996:10). However, looking simply at projects draws an excessive focus onto the individual (Ortner 1996:13). That is problematic because the pursuit of projects typically involves interaction with other agents; agents with their own intentions, their own projects, agents with different levels of contextual power and therefore agency to pursue their goals (Ortner 2006:151–2; 1996:12–3).

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<sup>14</sup> While I use the term discourse, it is important to make clear that I adopt a broad understanding aligned to Ortner’s conception of the subject, rather than Foucault’s discursively constructed subject (1996:1-20). A number of authors, such as Ahearn, argue that Foucault’s conception fails to sufficiently recognize the active intentionality and agency of subjects (2001:116-7). The broad conception of the subject outlined above is sufficient in the context of this thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Ortner provides an excellent overview of practice theories, though points out how complex and problematic such theories are: “The fundamental assumption of practice theory is that culture (in a very broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform – and usually some of each – the culture that made them” (Ortner 2006:129).

### 2.3 “Serious games”

In the pursuit of projects, each subject has some degree of agency in each situation and game, however pathetic that may seem to them or the outsider. As such, agency is not constant, not something which one has or does not, but rather something which is constantly and actively framed and negotiated in different “games”, roles, relationships and situations (Ortner 1996:12–21). This constant state of negotiation in relation to other agents, “embedded” as each is in “webs of relations” or “serious games”<sup>16</sup> (Ortner 2006:151), is essential to understanding an individual subject’s ability to practice in the world. Indeed, due to the importance of relational roles and the prescribed hierarchical positions of superordination and subordination in Myanmar (e.g. Fink 2001:120; Noack 2011:32; Maung Maung Gyi 1983:v), such shifting positions take on a great level of importance in understanding how Chan Chan pursues her projects as a subject. In this context, Chan Chan is ascribed, ascribes others, and takes up a series of different roles inside “serious games”. Even inside the same relationships, subjects may attempt to ascribe themselves and others different relational roles in order to increase (or decrease) their agentive space. In looking at how Chan Chan negotiates her various roles, it becomes clear that her agency is “complex and ambiguous”, that at times within the same relationship and in different relationships, she may accept, accommodate, or seek to reinscribe or renegotiate these roles (cf. Macleod 1992:534 cited in Ahearn 2001:116). While subjects can move fluidly between different roles, this need not involve “an explicit, self-conscious choice between clear and distinct identities” (Mills 1997). In light of these complexities, Ortner’s “serious games” concept becomes an effective analytical tool in analysing these relationally and situationally shifting roles.

“The idea of the “game” is meant to capture simultaneously the following dimensions: that social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth: that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous “agents”; and yet at the same time there is “agency”, that is, actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is “serious” is meant to add into the equation that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high” (Ortner 1996:12).

“Serious games” then, can be understood as “contests” between active players with different levels of power. In Myanmar, these power imbalances may appear fixed inside prescribed hierarchical relationships. Yet the example of my relationship with Chan Chan, which I detail in Chapter 7, demonstrates that agentive space is not something which one has or does not, but something which is constantly and actively negotiated and re-negotiated by active players seeking to, possibly generally but certainly not always, maximise their agentive space.

### 2.4 Theory in my relationship with Chan Chan

In looking at my relationship with Chan Chan, I not only employ a “serious games” approach, but also draw inspiration from the classic ethnographic biographies *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* by Vincent Crapanzano (1980) and *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* by Ruth Behar (1993). Both anthropologists’ profound

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<sup>16</sup> My use of the concept of the “serious game” is more limited than Ortner’s theory, in which the “game” is considered to constitute the subject as well, a concept that I find neither sufficiently developed in her works, nor productive for this thesis (1996:12-21).

reflections on their relationships with, and their nuanced representations of their interview partners, illustrate the importance and the analytical value of reflectivity on the anthropologist's part. I also draw on Crapanzano's observation that in interviews, the subject is prompted to produce "an articulation of experience" (1980:13). This idea, in particular, encouraged me to look more deeply at how Chan Chan's production of herself as an ethical woman/"leader" was related to and performed for me, in part inspired by her imagination of me as an unmarried man, a Westerner, a "Christian", and a university student inside a distinctly staged setting, the interview.

Edited by Berliner and Falen, the special edition of the journal *Men and Masculinities* entitled *Men Doing Anthropology of Women* was also invaluable in reflecting on my role, and particularly on the logistical challenges and barriers that a man faces in researching women (2008). Perhaps due to my anthropological education in Germany and the support of my supervisor and peers<sup>17</sup>, I did not suffer the nervousness of several other authors in studying women in the field. This nervousness would come later, as it became clear to me that gender was obviously central to understanding how Chan Chan does life<sup>18</sup>. This nervousness would only intensify as I approached the important questions of representation raised by Alcoff in *The Problem of Speaking for Others* (1991), which I turn to in Chapter 10.

## 2.5 "Telos" and "technologies of the self"

While Ortner's approach is an effective tool in understanding how Chan Chan operates inside complex "webs of relations" with others (2006:151), it is not suited to analyzing the work that Chan Chan does on the 'self' to be/become an ethical subject<sup>19</sup>. Drawing on Mahmood's use of "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988), I look at how Chan Chan performs various operations on herself to be the type of subject she both should be, and desires to be (Mahmood 2005:28-29). This subjective model is referred to within a Foucauldian ethics as "telos", or "the mode of being one seeks to achieve within a historically specific authoritative model" (Mahmood 2005:30). I turn to this in Chapter 9.

## 2.6 Summary

If articulating the approaches of Mahmood and Ortner appears to be an ad-hoc solution to the challenges raised by my field data, that is because it is. Inspired by grounded theory methodology, I arrived at this two-pronged approach through a process of on-going consultation between the interview transcripts and field notes, and different theories of agency. I believe that using these approaches together offers a powerful and effective tool kit to analyse Chan Chan's agency and practice "within the grammar of concepts within which it resides" (Mahmood 2005:34), while simultaneously allowing the analytical distance necessary for the production of academic knowledge.

In my approach, agency is broadly understood "as a form of intention and desire, as the pursuit of goals and the enactment of projects" (Ortner 2006:153). In the pursuit of her life

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<sup>17</sup> Berliner (2008:175-9) notes that it Anglo-Saxon colleagues were significantly more questioning of his ability to do fieldwork amongst women than his French counterparts. Berliner and Falen (2008:140) also note that while men researching women may encounter "resistance" from some feminist academics, this is by no means across the board.

<sup>18</sup> In part, this was naivety on my behalf. But it was also distaste at the way in which the study of women is marked and pigeon-holed as 'gender' research, while the study of patriarchal elements within a 'culture' are often accepted as unmarked, as somehow ungendered.

<sup>19</sup> While Ortner does argue that "serious games" can also take place "with the self" (1996:20), I find her approach less enlightening on this level than Mahmood's.

projects, Chan Chan's ability to pursue them is tempered by relationships with other actors pursuing their own intentions and projects inside the realms of "serious games" (Ortner 2006:152). In pursuing her desire to be/become the type of woman she both should be and desires to be as a subject, I look at how Chan Chan seeks out agentive spaces to perform operations on her 'self', in her project of a better rebirth (Mahmood 2005:30-1).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

I lived in Yangon between April and October 2014. During this time, I made extensive notes on conversations and interactions with colleagues, life on the expat scene, and descriptions of daily life in the city, especially observations of and conversations about Buddhist beliefs and practices, as well as important societal discourses. Working at an NGO, I also had the opportunity to speak to a number of local partners who worked for civil society organisations and government departments, and on a number of occasions I was able to avalanche them with questions in endless van trips and at dinner tables. I recorded these conversations in my diaries, and they informed my thought and understanding greatly.

Over time I had built up a good relationship with Chan Chan, my colleague. She taught me about Burmese-Buddhist conceptions, including horoscopes, days of birth, rebirth, *nats* and ghosts. The notes on these conversations and our trip together to the country's most important pagoda, Shwedagon, were also crucial for this thesis, as the chapter on our relationship will make clear. Over time, given both her openness and willingness to talk with me, as well as the fascinating things she had revealed to me about her life and her understanding of the world, I came to see Chan Chan as an ideal interview partner. When I finally asked her for an interview, she seemed surprised, flattered, and nervous. She accepted immediately. In total, I would conduct three interviews and record over 10 hours of material with her. I tried to steer the interviews to learn more about the importance of Burmese-Buddhist beliefs in her life practice. Within this framework, I was particularly interested in how she understood her agency, and how she attempted to practice it in her life world.

For the interviews, I adopted an approach loosely based on Rosenthal's biographical-narrative method (2004). I considered this technique particularly useful in allowing Chan Chan to reveal her own understandings and conceptions of agency, and how this fitted in with her life world, rather than imposing my own conceptions onto her world. In Rosenthal's approach, the semi-structured interviews are divided into three parts (2004, 50-53):

1. A narrative of the interviewee's life. It started with the broad question: "Tell me about your life". In this phase, the interviewee is encouraged to speak freely and openly. I rarely interrupted, and only then to understand what Chan Chan meant. She spoke for around 90 minutes. With a little prompting, she spoke for another hour.
2. In the second phase, I drew on points raised during her life story narrative, taking particular care to reuse her words and phrases, to ask her to expand on episodes I viewed as important, and to explain certain concepts which she had repeatedly referred to.
3. In the third phase I brought in a series of etic questions which I had drawn up prior to and during the interviews, inviting her to contextualize her own life within

academic conceptions of agency. The second and third stages of the interview were somewhat intertwined.

As a “biographical case reconstruction” methodology, Rosenthal’s method is designed to analyse the “structural differences between what is experienced and what is narrated” (2004, 53). This was not my purpose. Rather, this approach offered me a broad timeline of Chan Chan’s life. The points which she chose to tell me about provided me with a basic contextual background. Most significantly, this interview technique allowed Chan Chan to produce herself how she desired, to discuss what she saw as important in life, and to reveal how she understood her agency in theory and practice.

In analysing the interview data and my diaries, I adopted grounded theory techniques<sup>20</sup> outlined by Mey and Mruck (2009). The most important techniques in my final analysis was an “offenes Kodieren” (“open coding”) approach, as well as the creation of a number of “memos” which tied together various ideas, strands and conceptions (2009:108-144). These grounded theory tools, applied in combination with the theoretical approaches developed by Ortner and Mahmood, allowed Chan Chan to speak for herself while allowing me to perform an etic analysis. This methodological and theoretical approach was particularly valuable in allowing a series of new and more profound questions to emerge from the material itself, rather than through the stringent imposition of an external, and probably unsuitable, theoretical model.

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<sup>20</sup> While my approach to coding and the creation of memos were classic grounded theory methods, according to the specific set of methodologies outlined by Mey and Mruck as the basis of grounded theory, it would be misleading to label my approach grounded theory. The authors argue that most studies which claim to adopt a grounded theory approach actually in fact adopt only elements (2009:108-114).

## 4. LOCATING CHAN CHAN IN A MYANMAR CONTEXT

In this chapter I locate Chan Chan in contemporary Myanmar. To do so, I provide a brief outline of the discursive sets which create her, while enabling and restricting her agency her as a subject.

### 4.1 Burmese-Buddhist discourses

While contemporary forms of Theravada are understood to share similarities across localities and countries, modern scholarship emphasizes the localised differences between Buddhist understandings, practices, meanings, and values (e.g. Braun 2009:935–41; Schober 2008:255–67). Embedded in local histories, “cultures” and “traditions”, these Buddhisms developed distinctly local trajectories, and, as such “warrant consideration as multiple phenomena” (Braun 2009:940, 935). Even within Myanmar, urban, rural, ethnic and class differences, and the influence of modern Buddhist conceptions within Theravada discourses make the analytical conception of a single, coherent Burmese–Buddhism untenable. To avoid reproducing an artificial image of a coherent Burmese–Buddhism, I adopt the terms Burmese–Buddhisms, or Burmese-Buddhist conceptions and discourses. Most significantly, the Buddhist discourses which are important to Chan Chan need to be understood in the context of her social location as an urban, middle–class subject. Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate how discourses Chan Chan understands as Buddhist, which include a range of concepts articulated within an overarching Burmese-Buddhist framework, are central to her conception of her life world.

In Myanmar today, 98 percent of Burmese<sup>21</sup>, who make up about 68 percent of the population, identify themselves as Buddhist. When one includes Myanmar’s other ethnic groups, 89 percent of the population identify as Buddhist, while four percent identify themselves as Christian and Muslim respectively (Walton and Hayward 2014:4). In official and popular discourse, Buddhism has been the religion of today’s Myanmar since the time of the Buddha himself, when Shwedagon Pagoda is supposed to have been built (Board of Trustees 2014). Theravada itself is widely understood to have become the predominant form of Buddhism during the rule of Kyanzittha, around the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Swearer 2005:1132). The inseparability of Buddhist and national identity is clear in the

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<sup>21</sup> In using the term ‘Burmese’, I refer to the ethnic group, which is sometimes also referred to as Bamar or Burman. Some texts may also use the term Burmese as a description of nationality, thereby including all ethnicities in the country. In this text, I refer to the nationality as Myanmar.

nationalist cry: “To be Myanmar is to be Buddhist”. The Ministry of Information’s book, *The Teachings of the Buddha*, illustrates these Buddhist nationalist discourses clearly:

“Buddhism and Myanmar are inseparable and they are joined together permanently. The Buddha’s Teachings are the invaluable guidance for the Myanmar cultural traditions. Because of this invaluable guidance Myanmar has been a well civilized country in the world for thousands of years. The nationality and religious fervour are also well safeguarded” (Ministry of Information 2007:244).

In pro-actively re-assuming popular discourses of the nation as Buddhist after the collapse of Burmese Socialism in 1988, the regime attempted to secure its political legitimation (e.g. Tosa 2005:168; Schober 1995:316). In these nationalist discourses, Buddhism, “tradition” and nation become one (McCarthy 2007:116)<sup>22</sup>. In this vein, while Myanmar has not enjoyed the fruits of a market economy, its adherence to “true” Buddhism marks the people and therefore the nation as morally and spiritually superior to their more affluent neighbours and the West<sup>23</sup> (e.g. Schober 1995:311, 317). Since the 2011 ‘opening’ and the new freedoms of speech that have come with it, Buddhist-nationalist discourse has become increasingly virulent against apparent threats from the outside, particularly Western social “immorality” and Islam (e.g. Walton and Hayward 2014:26). In this sociohistorical context, it is perhaps not surprising that Buddhism takes on an inordinate importance in the lives of subjects like Chan Chan.

“(…) the great importance of Theravada Buddhism for people in Myanmar is clearly evident: their social interactions, worldviews and their imagination are determined by their religion to a degree almost inconceivable for a researcher who has grown up and lives in the secularized, predominantly atheist environment of central Europe where religion seems to have ceased influencing mainstream views and behaviours at all” (Noack 2011:241).

It will become clear that for many Burmese, Buddhism encompasses a range of practices, responsibilities and duties in everyday life which Westerners may not consider part of ‘religion’<sup>24</sup> as such. Indeed, the ‘modernity’ discourses which are so important to Chan Chan’s identification as a “modern” woman in a “modern” country only become meaningful when articulated within a Burmese-Buddhist/“tradition” discursive framework. Modernity, for example, is viewed through “a profoundly local lens, a lens that is fundamentally grounded in their religion” (Noack 2011:241). In other words, a range of discourses are and can be imbued with “truth” and “meaning” when they are accommodated within an overarching Burmese-Buddhist/“traditional” discursive framework.

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<sup>22</sup> In co-opting Buddhist symbolism and activities such as merit making, important Buddhist acts have become transformed into nationalist acts. As such, practicing one’s beliefs has become blurred with living out the nation. In doing so, the regime attempted to align itself with the kings of old, who under the dual pillars system, drew their legitimation through their support of and from the *sangha* (e.g. Schober 2005:117; Swearer 2005:1133-4)

<sup>23</sup> The moral corruption of the West can be seen in the government’s English language daily, *The New Light of Myanmar*, which is filled with articles from international news feeds (i.e. endless series of disasters - with what little positive news that comes through in such wires filtered out), while Myanmar’s government representatives are shown making constant progress, opening schools, congratulating local “heroes”, and standing beside monks (Field notes 2014). On several occasions, Chan Chan repeated such sentiments (Field notes 2014).

<sup>24</sup> There is no direct equivalent in Myanmar to contemporary Western conceptions of ‘religion’. Rather: “The pali word *sasana* refers broadly to the Buddhist religion, but it should also be understood as including the entire Buddhist community (of monks, nuns, and laypeople) and the Buddha’s teachings themselves. For Theravada Buddhists, this includes the texts of the Pali canon, as well as the vast commentarial literature and the lived knowledge of these teachings among Buddhists.” (Walton and Hayward 2014:21: brackets in original).

#### 4.1.1 *The Law of Cause and Effect (The Law of Karma)*

The Law of Cause and Effect, which Chan Chan referred to as “science”, in fitting within “modern” Buddhist conceptions (Braun 2009:242), is commonly understood as the basis of how the world functions. According to this law, the chain of cause and effect is never ending. As such, one is stuck in an endless chain of existences (*samsara*). It is only through the extinction of all cause that one ceases to exist. Given that the first noble truth is that all existence is suffering<sup>25</sup>, in canonical Burmese-Buddhist understandings, nirvana is generally understood as the cessation of all cause, and therefore of existence<sup>26</sup>. These elite Buddhisms differ from (probably) most forms of popular Buddhism, in which the goal is not the attainment of nirvana per se, but rather a better rebirth in the next life. In this endless chain of cause and effect, meritorious deeds create good cause, which in turn lead to good effect. In many popular Buddhist understandings, a better rebirth can be achieved solely through the performance of meritorious deeds, while no work on one’s ‘self’ is required (Spiro 1982:93–4). Merit, in these conceptions, can be obtained in three main ways: by following the five precepts or *sila*<sup>27</sup>, making religious donations (*dana*) and meditation. However, this focus is too narrow for Chan Chan, whose understanding of “cause” (*kusala*) clearly also includes the pursuit of the four virtues (*brahmaviharas*). Cause, in this conception, should not be understood as created by simply performing merit making practices, but also the “manner” in which merit is made and indeed all life practice: “Kamma (karma) means all kinds of intentional actions, mental, verbal, physical, that is, all thoughts, words and deeds” (Khin Myo Chit 1995:55).

“There is no element of reward and punishment by any outside power in the Law of Kamma. If good action produces good effect, bad actions produce bad results, it is neither justice nor reward meted out by any power sitting in judgment on anyone’s action, but it is virtue of its own nature, its own law” (Khin Myo Chit 1995:55).

Chan Chan’s conception of the ‘self’, of proper conduct within the world, of her projects in life, of her agency and life practice are all founded on such an understanding of the Law of Karma<sup>28</sup>. In this conception, the individual has the “freedom” to perform “good” or “bad” actions (Khin Myo Chit 1995:55). Indeed, Burmese-Buddhist conceptions do not merely offer individuals this agentive space, being an active agent is the only hope of achieving salvation, be it the “proximate salvation” of a better rebirth, or the attainment of nirvana (Spiro 1982:132–3).

“It is very hard to be born a human being. Meritorious deeds such as charity, morality and meditation can be performed only in the human life. In the four miserable realms, these meritorious deeds cannot be performed, because beings there have to suffer miseries all the time. Also in the realms of devas and brahmas, it is not easy to do meritorious deeds, because they are intoxicated with various kinds of pleasure... Now we have the golden chance to be born as human beings and to study, practice, and realise the Teachings of the Buddha. So we should earnestly strive to be a real Buddhist” (Ministry of Information 2007:2).

<sup>25</sup> The first sermon the Buddha delivered after achieving enlightenment was on the four noble truths: That is, that life is suffering; that suffering is caused by craving, desire and ignorance; to end suffering one must “remove all desire, ill will and ignorance”; that the noble eight-fold path leads to the end of rebirths, and therefore the end of suffering (Buddhanet 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Contrary to academic conceptions of Buddhism when Spiro completed his work, it is now academically accepted that a single, shared Pali canon does not exist across localities, let alone countries (Braun 2009:938-9).

<sup>27</sup> The five precepts which every Buddhist should, at least in popular discourse, follow: do not kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants. Even the casual observer will note that these precepts are somewhat open to interpretation.

<sup>28</sup> Khin Myo Chit pointed out how essential Buddhist conceptions are in understanding the world, with even the “non-religious” stories her grandfather told her as a child being based on the Law of Karma and the cycle of rebirth (1995:38-9).

For many Buddhists, seeking “proximate salvation” makes sense for several reasons. Spiro argued that most Burmese-Buddhists do not accept the first noble truth, that life is suffering (*dukkha*) and therefore do not seek its total cessation, nirvana (Spiro 1982:13, 67). Furthermore, the huge number of rebirths and the total commitment required to attain nirvana makes it unachievable for the majority of people, especially in the very next life (Spiro 1982:13, 67). For these reasons, and a number of others which I develop in Chapter 10, Chan Chan’s goal of rebirth as a man is logical for a woman in her position.

#### 4.1.2 The ‘self’: Rebirth & the ‘true’ self

A crucial aspect in understanding the pursuit of a better rebirth is the conception of the ‘self’ which Chan Chan reproduced. Contrary to intellectual Buddhist notions of *anatta* (or non-soul), Burmese-Buddhists commonly conceive of the soul in the form of the *leikpya*, an invisible butterfly containing a person’s thoughts, life force, consciousness and desires (Noack 2014:97). At death, the *leikpya* leaves the body (Noack 2014:97; Spiro 1982:85) and then, all going well, enters a different body after seven days<sup>29</sup>. While Chan Chan also told me the *leikpya* was “not science”, and that she did not believe in it, she nevertheless clearly believed in the rebirth of some form a ‘self’. For without some continuity of the ‘self’, Chan Chan’s over-arching project of a better rebirth of the same ‘self’ which had produced good cause and therefore deserved it would have been futile (cf. Spiro 1982:73, 85–91). However, given that the very concept of the ‘self’ is heretical (Noack 2011:32), and that ‘self’ was a term Chan Chan never used, my use of it should be understood as an analytical construct and shorthand for what Collins refers to as the idea that “...there exists some feeling – not necessarily or even articulated – for the continuing existence and importance in this life and thereafter of oneself, of others, and of gods” (Collins 1982:6).

A second fundamental aspect of the ‘self’ Chan Chan ascribed to is the blurring or even dissolution of barriers between a “true, inner self” and the “external” surface.

“The importance of public self-images (or ‘face’ as they are often called) in Myanmar and other Buddhist societies in the region is well documented and supports the view that the ‘surface’ seems to be attributed great importance as a publicly visible expression of personhood – or self, as ‘Westerners’ would say” (Noack 2011:31–2: brackets in original).

As such, a definite distinction between the ‘surface’ and a ‘true’ inner self (as in Western conceptions) does not exist. For example, Chan Chan told me, the large eyes of a young woman not only showed that she is “innocent”, but that she *is*, in fact, “innocent”. Likewise, it is not merely the monk’s face which is serene, “he”<sup>30</sup> *is* serene (Khin Myo Chit 2014:18–21). The importance of these two aspects in Chan Chan’s understanding of the self will become apparent throughout this thesis.

#### 4.1.3 Practice over theology

Chan Chan’s Buddhist learning appeared to be based primarily on discourses and lectures delivered by monks, the reading of Buddhist treatise including *The Way of Death*, through teaching from her parents, the *jataka*<sup>31</sup> stories, and through the performance of ritual in

<sup>29</sup> Chan Chan told me that those who suffer violent/sudden deaths, or are not prepared to leave their places in the mundane world may be trapped in the ghostly realm.

<sup>30</sup> Monks are considered to be a third, asexual gender, yet this gender can only be arrived at through the biological body of a man (Jordt 2007:159).

<sup>31</sup> Gautama Buddha required 547 rebirths to achieve the ten perfections (*parami*) and to attain Buddhahood (Zöllner 2014:84). These rebirths are told about in the *jataka* (stories). Spiro argued that for his interlocu-

the home and at the pagoda. On our visit to Shwedagon Pagoda, the centre of Myanmar-Buddhism, Chan Chan and her best friend seemed disappointed by their inability to answer many of my questions about the meanings and significance of a number of the sites, the importance of many of the creatures, or the history of Buddhism in Myanmar. Rather, Chan Chan's focus throughout the visit, and later through her explanations of how she understood the Law of Cause and Effect, made it apparent to me that Buddhism for her was about practice rather than knowledge. That is, her focus was not on a knowledge of facts<sup>32</sup>, but on the performance of Burmese-Buddhist rituals, as well as customs and ethics in daily life<sup>33</sup>. This reflects Spiro's finding that while his village interlocutors had little knowledge of canonical works, Buddhist ethics were not only used to assess "all values, ideas, and behaviour", but that these ethics and conceptions were a mainstay of conversation and debate (1982:20-22).

In short, Burmese-Buddhist conceptions shape the fundamental "truths" of Chan Chan's world. It is this over-arching discursive framework – open as it is to the assimilation of other discourses within it – which shapes her understanding of the world, her agency within it, her fundamental approach to life and, indeed, her life practice.

## 4.2 Gender

### ***"People talk about the equality of genders in this country, this of course, is an over-optimistic view" Aung San Suu Kyi (Larlee 2015)***

Earlier works often claimed that Burmese women had a higher standing than women in the "West": they were more independent, and even had "equal rights" with men (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:8-16; Scott 1896:52-53; Tharaphi Than 2014:1-2). Today, the questionable claim to women's "traditionally" "equal" – or at least high – status is still commonly repeated (Tharaphi Than 2014:2-3): by prominent, educated women inside Myanmar (Tharaphi Than 2014:2-3) including the first women to become a cabinet minister in government Myat Myat Ohn Khin (Larlee 2015); by local academics such as Han Tin who wrote "In Myanmar, no social inequalities can be discerned between men and women" (2000, 145)<sup>34</sup>; by Western "feminists" as an apparent cause celebre (e.g. Muller 1994:611); and by highly regarded foreign experts on Myanmar such as David Steinberg (2013, 110-1). As evidence for this apparent equality, Mi Mi Khaing pointed to women's "traditionally" high rate of literacy, right to divorce, ownership of property, control of family finances<sup>35</sup>, right to work and to pursue spiritual enlightenment, and the potential to obtain powerful positions, although this was most definitely the exception rather than the rule (1984:8-16). According to Spiro, women's control of the household finances, subtle but definite

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tors, the *jataka* were the only important means of transmitting Buddhist concepts and ethics (1982:20-1). Chan Chan's Buddhist education is clearly significantly wider than that, and she told me several anecdotes which were essentially modern parables about the performance of Buddhist ethics.

<sup>32</sup> This contrast was particularly apparent because I had visited Shwedagon with a European religious studies scholar only two days prior. This tour focused on an explanation of the different statues, creatures, stories, and the academically accepted history of Buddhism in Myanmar.

<sup>33</sup> Burmese-Buddhist practices and images are to be found everywhere in daily life. These include sleeping with the head in the direction of the house shrine, the separation of men's and women's clothing, and the ubiquitous images and statues of the Buddha in taxis, buses, tea-houses, restaurants, gyms and so forth (Field notes 21014; cf. Noack 2014:94).

<sup>34</sup> Those tempted to take Han Tin's claims on face value may wish to read the following sentence: "In a society founded upon tolerance and gentleness, there is very little discrimination based on race, class, colour or gender" (2000:145).

<sup>35</sup> While I did not find a single source which claimed that men control family budgets, one report on expectations of marriage from unwed teenagers indicates this may be changing, at least in Yangon (Myo Thwin 2007:142-148). Another reading is possible. Far from demonstrating women's "high status", women's control over finances and other forms of "entanglement with the world" demonstrate their 'natural' profanity and inferiority (Jordt 2005:61-2).

material and psychological dominance in the home, as well as condescending discourses about men were central to women's comparatively high level of "economic, legal, and social equality" (1993a:319). In this context, Mi Mi Khaing claimed that while women did face some disadvantages, they had been able to lead happy and full lives, and had therefore not challenged the status quo as they had in the West (1984:16).

The discourse of women's independence has fundamentally shaped "academic and popular knowledge" (Chie Ikeya 2006:8), and has contributed to the paucity of research on women in Myanmar (Tharaphi Than 2014:3). Indeed, while contemporary scholars of Southeast Asia "generally concur that claims about the high status of women in Southeast Asia are oversimplified and highly problematic", this has not been the case in Burma/Myanmar (Chie Ikeya 2006:19). However, Chie Ikeya (2006), Tharaphi Than (2014), Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2014) and Ingrid Jordt (2005; 2007) are representative of a growing number of contemporary scholars who are actively questioning the established 'truth' of gender equality in Myanmar. Indeed, a small number of women, such as writer Khin Myo Chit, have long critiqued gender equality discourses.

"However much (foreigners) said that Burmese women were liberated and had equal opportunities, ideologies and opinions that degraded women could be seen everywhere" (Khin Myo Chit 2006:115 cited in Tharaphi Than 2014:123-4).

Tharaphi Than's review of realist literature by and about women comes closest to a study on how women did life in urban Myanmar during the decades of military rule (2014:31-46). Tharaphi Than argued that realist literature is so important because the near total prohibition on research and strict government censorship<sup>36</sup> made it virtually impossible to learn about the lives of 'ordinary' people. Indeed, works by authors such as Moe Moe (Inya) revealed a "powerful counter-narrative of this romantic picture of Burmese women" (2014:42).

Inside Myanmar today, the gender equality discourse is being actively questioned by civil society organisations, NGOs (cf. Khen 2014:353), and prominent women, such as NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi (Larlee 2015). Through the work of a number of organizations which have become increasingly active since about 2000 (Khen 2014:357), and especially under the banner of the Gender Equality Network (GEN)<sup>37</sup>, women's rights have become increasingly prominent at a political level, in the media and (likely) in everyday life. Through their work, physical, emotional and sexual harassment and violence against women have become common themes (e.g. Phyu Phyu Zin 2014)<sup>38</sup>, as have legal discrimination against women (e.g. Al Jazeera 2015), and the extremely limited representation of women in positions of economic, governmental and military power<sup>39</sup>.

Indeed, societal indicators demonstrate that the discourse of women's equality became increasingly untenable during the regime years. Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi found that women suffered even more than men under the regime. Structural discrimination against women was due to militarization and the subsequent patriarchal monopoly on power, the development of further patriarchal discourses, the regime's failed economic policies and spiralling inflation, loss of business opportunities for women, poor education, lack of electricity and water for work in the home, and a lack of access to healthcare and sexual education (2014:305-330). Today, women are "overrepresented among the poorest of the

<sup>36</sup> In August 2012 pre-publication censorship was stopped, though post-publication censorship continues. Since 2011 censorship has continued and arrests of journalists have continued through the application of vague and ambiguous laws (Leehey 1.8.2014).

<sup>37</sup> The Gender Equality Network is an inter-agency network made up of NGOs, CSOs, UN agencies and advisors. It was founded in 2008, in the wake of Cyclone Nargis.

<sup>38</sup> In their study of predominantly lower and middle class women in Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city, Kyu and Kanai reported that "27% of women experienced physical assault and 69% of women experienced psychological aggression in a 1-year period" (2005:244).

<sup>39</sup> In 2014 women held 29 of the 664 seats in the national parliament, and 24 of the 887 in regional parliaments (Khen 2014:353).

poor” (Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2014:315), are generally stuck in “low-status, low-skilled” work (Maber 2014:144), are at high risk of HIV infection (Asian Development Bank 2012), and mortality rates during childbirth are amongst the highest in the world (Asian Development Bank 2012). In 2013, Myanmar was ranked 83 from 187 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (United Nations Development Programme 2014:174).

For urban middle-class young adults like Chan Chan, the economic disaster of military rule, as well as the dissolution of the education system after 1988, appear to be understood as the having had the most significant impact of the regime on their lives. In these conceptions, the regime had inhibited their chances of achieving the social advancement and prosperity which previous generations, and the contemporary elite, enjoyed (cf. Nan Htun Naing 2015).

#### 4.2.1 Women as naturally inferior

The concept of *hpoun* reflects not only a man’s spiritual superiority, but also his “worldly authority, influence and power” (Noack 2014:96: my translation)<sup>40</sup>. This belief is legitimised by the fact that only a man can enter the monkhood, become a saint (*arahat*), or a Buddha (Jordt 2007:162). By virtue of his rebirth on the highest rung of earthly existence, a man possesses *hpoun*, whereas a woman does not (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:21–3; Aye Nwe 2009:131). *Hpoun* is “a psycho-spiritual quality, an ineffable essence, which invests its possessor with superior moral, spiritual and intellectual power” (Spiro 1977:236), “as well as protecting him from danger and failure” (Noack 2011:254). Men have different levels of *hpoun*, and this is vulnerable to women (e.g. Aye Nwe 2009:132). As such, it is a woman’s duty to defer to and to protect the *hpoun* of a man, both inside and outside the home (e.g. Aye Nwe 2009:133; Mi Mi Khaing 1984:21–3; Chit Ko Ko 2007:127). Deference is performed through a wide variety of practices based on the apparent understanding that women threaten a man’s “sexual, physical and spiritual” power and authority (Spiro 1997:26, 153; Noack 2014:95–7).

According to a number of local authors, male dominance has gone largely unchallenged in Myanmar as *hpoun* is a concept deeply engrained in both men’s and women’s understandings of the world (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:21–3; Aye Nwe 2009:131–139). However, *hpoun* as a concept is being challenged today, at least by some local academics and writers (Min Zin 2001)<sup>41</sup>.

“The cultural phon (*hpoun*) is the cause of gender hierarchy and women are oppressed, marginalized, excluded, and discriminated in social, political, economic and religious spheres” (Aye Nwe 2009:131: my brackets).

Drawing on the *jataka*, and referring to the order of Bikkhunis (nuns), who were on a par with monks in the time of the Buddha, Aye Nwe argues that *hpoun* is a dated and patriarchal folk-belief. In doing so, she attempts to invalidate the conception of *hpoun* by arguing that it does not belong within “modern” Buddhism (2009:131–7).

Women’s ‘natural’ subservience to men is not only legitimised by *hpoun* (Spiro 1997:20), but also *awza* (Spiro 1993a:320), which Noack translates as “power, authority, influence” (2011:259).

“By cultural prescription the exercise of authority (*awza*) is a male prerogative, so any social status endowed with authority is, by cultural ascription, a male monopoly” (Spiro 1993a:320).

<sup>40</sup> In the German original: „...weltliche Autorität, Einfluss und Macht“ (Noack 2014:96).

<sup>41</sup> Min Zin argued that *hpoun* is central to all unequal power relations within Myanmar society. *Hpoun* is self-perpetuating because a man can only hold power if he has *hpoun*. Therefore in holding power, he must have *hpoun*. As a concept, it has long been used by the military to justify its rule (2001).

In contextualising Chan Chan's social location in Myanmar, it is important to understand that relationships are typically hierarchical (Noack 2011:32). Awareness of and performance in accordance with one's hierarchical position is vital (*ana*) (Fink 2001:120). As these hierarchical understandings are based primarily on gender, age and social prestige (*goun*), Chan Chan is often cast in a subordinate role in relation to others (cf. Noack 2011:31–2, 200–204).

By virtue of their biological sex, women are often also characterised as stupid, overly emotional, malicious, wanton and needing male protection (Spiro 1997:20–45)<sup>42</sup>. According to Spiro, women are widely considered to have “three moral defects: greed, ‘evil’ practices, and lust” (1997:21). As such, the potential immorality of women, particularly “sexual misconduct”, has often been portrayed as a threat not only to men, but also to Buddhism, “tradition” and the even to the nation itself (Chie Ikeya 2006:18).

“According to women like Daw Mya Sein and Daw Ni Ni Myint (prominent women in contemporary Myanmar), Burmese women do not demand rights, or there does not exist any precedent for Burmese women to initiate feminist movements, as they are content and secure.... The overwhelming message for Burmese women is that they must feel secure and content, and feeling otherwise is against both Burmese traditions and Burmese women's traditions” (Tharaphi Than 2014:3: my brackets).

In this context, being both “content” and “secure” has become crucial in holding up a wider discourse of the superiority of Burmese–Buddhism, tradition and the nation (cf. Chie Ikeya 2006:18; Tharaphi Than 2014:124). I heard narratives in line with this popular discourse on a number of occasions (Field notes 2014). The suspicion of women and anxiety about their apparently “insatiable” sexual appetites (Spiro 1997:20–44) typically results in a level of control being exercised over them – and unmarried women in particular – which pervades their lives (Ohnmar Ong 2005:51). Women are expected to perform and therefore to be modest, shy, innocent and sexually naive (e.g. Noack 2011:189). For Chan Chan, who worked hard to perform and therefore to be a socially appropriate, ethical woman, this resulted in a lack of “freedom” in comparison to her unmarried brother. Indeed, while it was inappropriate for women to have sexual relations prior to marriage, Ohnmar Aung found that young men in her study talked openly about having multiple girlfriends and visiting prostitutes, and engaging in homosexual practices (2005:73).

Chan Chan herself often repeated discourses on ‘natural’ differences between men and women. While women were portrayed negatively by men, Chan Chan reproduced women's counter discourses, portraying men as childish, irresponsible, lazy, incompetent, dishonest and lacking self control (cf. Spiro 1993a:323; Muller 1994:613). According to Chan Chan, due to the discrimination they faced, a lot of young women are like her: ethical, hard-working and determined to overcome gendered barriers, particularly in education and the world of work<sup>43</sup> (cf. Khin Myo Chit 1995:186–206).

Another aspect of naturalised gender differences is the bond which exists between women (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:114–5). Women guard a range of knowledge about, for example, sexuality (or lack thereof for unmarried women) (Ohnmar 2005:65–7) and childbirth (Chit Ko Ko 2007:110–1). These bonds also include an emotional and physical closeness between women (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:114–5), as evidenced by Chan Chan's relationship to

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<sup>42</sup> Typical of such discourses is a quote from Aung Myaing from the Theravada Dharma Network on the push for laws which would effectively prohibit Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men: “It is a loss for Buddhists when Buddhist women get married with foreigners or those from other religions. Our Buddhist women are not intelligent enough to protect themselves. There a lot of issues. So we are doing this to enlighten Burmese Buddhist women” (DVB 2013). The Interfaith Marriage Bill was passed in July 2015.

<sup>43</sup> There is some evidence for this, with women making up 53 percent of tertiary enrolments in 2010/11 (Asian Development Bank 2012:1).

her mother and her best friend. Indeed, gender segregation is evident in daily life, on the streets, on television soap operas, in literature, and in the professional environment<sup>44</sup>.

For Chan Chan, “freedom” differentiated men’s and women’s lives. As a woman, she understood her “freedom” as limited in terms of religious practice, career and economic opportunities<sup>45</sup>, political representation, movement, and family responsibility. With the exception of gendered religious practice restrictions on women, which Chan Chan attributed to the Buddha himself (in other words, *hpoun*), she railed against unequal power relations and the unfair treatment of women in Myanmar as a violation of “human rights”<sup>46</sup>. As I develop in Chapter 6, in actively questioning naturalised differences, Chan Chan seeks to legitimate claims to power and agency which ascribed gender roles would preclude. Nevertheless, Chan Chan also actively reinforces naturalised gender claims in the pursuit of her own projects, particularly in her relationship with an imagined husband and her desire to be reborn a man.

### 4.3 Social location in contemporary Yangon

Gender is not the only important factor in contextualising Chan Chan as a subject. As Ortner has pointed out “gender is never (...) the only game in town” (1996:19). It is important to understand its intersectionality with “race”, religion and social strata. Indeed, Chan Chan enjoys comparative financial and career freedoms in one of the world’s poorer countries<sup>47</sup>.

In local narratives, Myanmar society is often divided into three distinct social strata (Noack 2011:209–10). The majority of the lower class live at or below the poverty line. They are unlikely to have electricity or running water in their homes (especially outside of the major cities), and are likely to live in bamboo huts on the urban periphery, in smaller centres or on the land. Passing a hospital in a taxi one day, the driver said to me that most people will never be lucky enough to go there as “medicine is expensive, (but) dying is free” (Field notes 2014). In contrast, the “very small” upper class is made up of political, military and business elites who lead a luxurious lifestyle, often enjoy a foreign education and have access to excellent healthcare.

As an office worker with an income two to four times that of a labourer or factory worker<sup>48</sup>, a good (local) education, fluency in Myanmar, English and Mandarin, a smart phone, a wardrobe full of “traditional” and some Western clothing, access to local medical care, and enough money to occasionally use taxis, Chan Chan would be counted as part of the urban middle class (Noack 2011:209–10; Thant Myint-U 1.8.2014). Moreover, she is from the Burmese-Buddhist majority<sup>49</sup> which maintains control over positions of political/economic/military<sup>50</sup> power.

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<sup>44</sup> At business and official dinners, men and women typically sit at different tables, much to the annoyance and incomprehension of a number of Westerners. Several Western women I spoke to interpreted this as both disrespectful and a way in which women were locked out of power by men (Field notes 2014).

<sup>45</sup> The Asian Development Bank Gender Analysis report found that women were greatly underrepresented “in the higher ranks of paid employment, with women concentrated in lower ranks and less-skilled jobs” (2012:2-3).

<sup>46</sup> NGOs (e.g. Wagley 2013), civil society organisations (CSOs) and opposition groups, including Chan Chan’s idol Aung San Suu Kyi, often draw on “human rights” discourses to legitimate arguments on a host of issues. These discourses are often articulated within a Burmese-Buddhist framework (e.g. Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Myanmar was ranked 150 out of 186 countries in the Human Development Report 2014 (United Nations Development Programme 2014:159).

<sup>48</sup> This is comparative. A westerner working in a similar role could expect to earn several times as much.

<sup>49</sup> This is particularly significant in a country where “race”/religion are key determinants of social and economic status and opportunities. This is much too complex to delve into here. For good general overviews about “race”/religion see Steinberg (2013) and South (2008).

<sup>50</sup> Political, economic and military power have long been inextricably intertwined in Myanmar. It remains to be seen how, and to what extent, that will change with the New League for Democracy in power.

The middle class also has “good access to foreign media and discourses about modernity and globalization in which they actively participate”, and see “themselves as the main bearers and supporters of Myanmar culture and Buddhism” (Noack 2011:209). Indeed, while Chan Chan often used the word “tradition”, it is clear that she ascribes to a form of neo-traditionalism found in “modern” Buddhist discourses (cf. Braun 2009:942). Globally, modern Buddhism can be discerned by four important strands.

“These are the identification of the present as a standpoint from which to view the past (and to note deficiencies of the recent past in comparison to a present more faithful to an originary period), a rejection of ritual and magical elements in Buddhism<sup>51</sup>, a stress on equality over hierarchy, and a promotion of the individual over the community” (Lopez 2002:ix cited in Braun 2009:942).

These global, modern Buddhist discourses are nevertheless viewed through a uniquely “local lens” (Noack 2011:241):

“younger members of the middle class especially, often take a position that does not favour the preservation of ‘tradition’ in general, but rather a ‘pure’ Buddhist morality cleansed of many ‘backward traditional elements’ combined with a modern lifestyle. However, the dividing line between ‘backward traditions’ and ‘pure Buddhism’ is drawn differently by different genders, age groups and social groupings within the middle class” (Noack 2011:210).

Finally, Chan Chan’s life projects reflect her position in what is commonly conceived of as the second phase of life. In this phase, the aim is to become financially secure/wealthy and to have a family. In these discourses, the first phase is dedicated to education, while in the third and final phase one should seek “religious insight and virtuosity” in preparation for death and rebirth (Noack 2011:189; Jordt 2005:47–8).

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<sup>51</sup> Chan Chan’s dismissal of “non-scientific” elements within popular Burmese-Buddhisms is representative of her modern Buddhist understandings. However, the articulation of Theravada and science is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar or other Southeast Asian countries, as this “scientism” emerged under colonial influence (Schober 1995:315; Swearer 2005:1131). Obviously, this discourse was part of an emphasis on Buddhism as rational, scientific, modern. Indeed, the Ministry of Information also referred to the Law of Karma as “the scientific truth” (2007:62).

## 5. PROJECTS

This chapter provides a brief overview of Chan Chan's projects, laying the foundation for the following chapters.

On a visit with Chan Chan and her best friend to Shwedagon Pagoda, Chan Chan stopped at each of the four corners to pay homage to each of the Buddha's in this world cycle. After paying homage for a couple of minutes at each, she took a photo on her smartphone of the flower arrangements which are the trademark of the festival of Wagaung. However, at the ten-metre tall Chan Thar Gyi (pictured), Chan Chan paid homage for about 15 minutes. With an Epson logo on his robe, Chan Thar Gyi, or the Buddha of Wealth, is particularly important and popular as "the title (name) is very good right...there is no people who don't want to be wealthy", Chan Chan told me<sup>52</sup>. Here, Chan Chan explained to me later, she had paid homage to the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha)<sup>53</sup>, as well as to her parents and her teachers, before spreading merit to all living things in all ten directions<sup>54</sup>. After completing these standard rites of homage, she asked the Buddha for "the chance" to pursue her five goals in life.

Her five projects are:

1. To look after her parents until they pass away.
2. Visit as many important pagodas as possible in Myanmar, to do good deeds, and to make donations/merit.
3. To meet a man, marry and start her own family.
4. Constantly develop her professional career (It should be well-paid, fulfilling and high-status).
5. Do charity work.

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<sup>52</sup> During the time Chan Chan paid homage at Chan Thar Gyi I observed about 20 people there. Only two were not women. While women significantly outnumber men at the pagoda, Chan Thar Gyi may take on special importance because women are typically responsible for family finances (Field notes 2014).

<sup>53</sup> The fundament of Theravada Buddhism are the Three Gems: the Buddha, Dhamma ("doctrine", "truth", "law"), and Sangha (widely understood as the order of monks). In paying homage, Burmese-Buddhists "take refuge" in the three gems (Gombrich 2006:1). They may then pay homage to their parents and their teachers, though Chan Chan stressed this was only if they had time.

<sup>54</sup> The directions of the compass plus the planes above and below this one, the fifth plane of existence.

These are all clear merit-making projects<sup>55</sup>, and as such, contribute to Chan Chan's supramundane project, a better rebirth<sup>56</sup>. As socially appropriate and desirable projects for her subject position, they are achievable and logical to her. Yet they are also definitively her own. In actively making these "cultural projects" her own, Chan Chan imbues her "life with meaning and purpose" (Ortner; 2006:144–7). In the following chapters, I analyse how Chan Chan attempts conceives of her agency, and how she pursues her marriage and career projects in practice.



Chan Thar Gyi, the  
Buddha of Wealth

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<sup>55</sup> Visiting pagodas and performing charity work are clear merit-making projects. Fulfilment of her duties to her parents and sending a son to the monastery are also crucial merit-making avenues. Financial success is also important, in allowing Chan Chan to make larger *dana* (donations) and thereby accrue greater merit.

<sup>56</sup> In Chan Chan's modern Buddhist framework of understanding, merit-making is also contingent on ethical performance, which is the focus of chapter 9.

## 6. PRODUCING THE AGENTIVE SELF

*“Even the god cannot fulfil a man’s wishes.” Myanmar Proverb (Meiji Soe 2014:99).*

In the previous chapters, I have located Chan Chan as a subject inside a complex of discursive sets. In this chapter, I turn to how she draws on discourses available within this framework to produce herself as agentive. I argue that Chan Chan produces herself as an educated, intelligent, capable, dutiful, socially appropriate and “modern” Burmese-Buddhist woman as a strategy to create the agentive space she sees as essential to pursuing her projects. In producing herself as what she termed a “leader”, a concept based in Burmese-Buddhist discourses, Chan Chan’s production of herself paradoxically opens up and restricts her potential agentive space. Given these paradoxes, her production and conception of herself is essential in analyzing how she conceives of and attempts to practice in her life world (cf. Ahearn 2001:113). In the two chapters following this one, I focus on how she pursues her projects in competition with others inside “serious games”. In doing so, I illustrate how her narrative construction of herself, discourses on socially appropriate behaviours, as well as the typically subordinate roles she is expected to inhabit as a young, unmarried woman restrict the agentive spaces in which she is able to pursue her projects.

### 6.1 Producing herself in a staged setting

Crapanzano observed that in interviews, the subject is prompted to produce “an articulation of experience” in a distinctly staged setting (1980:13). The interview set-up pushes the interviewee to follow the rules of a narrative construction. The completeness and apparent ease with which Chan Chan did this, in particular her laying out of her five main projects in life, suggested to me that these narratives were not newly created for the interview as such, that they were indeed similar to her self-narratives. Nevertheless, while the subject engages in “the narrativization of the self” (Hall 1996:6), the interview situation invariably encouraged Chan Chan to produce a self tailored to her audience, to me<sup>57</sup>. That is, Chan Chan’s imagination of me, her ascription of my role and assumptions about what I understood about Burmese-Buddhist “culture”, what she assumed I wanted to know, and her desire to perform as a certain type of women played an important role in how she produced herself. The production of herself was, to some extent, posed like a

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<sup>57</sup> Possibly also to the imagined reader, though it is not at all clear to what extent she had a reader in mind.

photograph in a studio, a staged production in a staged setting. The interview situation therefore became a platform to demonstrate her social prestige (*goun*):

“...the more social prestige a person is perceived to have, the more privileges will be granted to her. Everybody in Myanmar is aware of this and most people publicly claim as much prestige as is reasonable possible in order to enjoy the favourable treatment of others that will result from this” (Noack 2011:204).

This is not to suggest that Chan Chan was not “honest”<sup>58</sup> or “open”, she stressed repeatedly that she was, and I certainly believe that she was (this claim could, of course, also been seen as part of her self-production). It is simply to be aware that the production of the self was also intention-filled (though not necessarily consciously so), and demonstrated the appropriate performance of gendered norms within a Burmese-Buddhist/“traditional” discursive frame. It is to say that the hair was retouched, the *longhi* correctly lined up and flattened out, the photo posed for a favourable angle in favourable light. From an analytical perspective therefore, Chan Chan’s production of herself could be seen to emphasize and obscure elements of herself. Nevertheless, and perhaps more importantly from an anthropological perspective, this production illustrates the self Chan Chan wants to project.

## 6.2 Agency in a Burmese-Buddhist imaginary

Ahearn argues that it is crucial to understand how actors conceive of their own agency, as these emic conceptions open up definitions of and capacities for action which an external, transposed framework may obscure, elide or flatten out (2001:113). In the following chapters, the incongruencies between Chan Chan’s production of herself as agentive and her ability to practice inside serious games reveal how she understands her agency to be restricted, as well as the shifting strategies she takes up to be the agent she produces herself to be.

“Agency was not ontologically prior to that (sociocultural) context but arose from the social, political, and cultural dynamics of a specific place and time” (Ahearn 2001:113: brackets in original).

Inspired by parallels between the “pious” Muslim women in Mahmood’s study who drew on a “religious imaginary” to open up agentive space (2005:168–74), I argue that Chan Chan emphasises Burmese-Buddhist discourses of agency over other possible interpretations (with varying degrees of effectiveness), to etch out agentive space for herself. The oft-repeated Burmese-Buddhist agency discourse Chan Chan draws on is best summarised in the *Teachings of the Buddha*.

“Meritorious deeds such as charity, morality and meditation can be performed only in the human life...Now we have the golden chance to be born as human beings and to study, practice, and realise the Teachings of the Buddha. So we should earnestly strive to be a real Buddhist” (Ministry of Information 2007:2).

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<sup>58</sup> Chan Chan’s emphasis on “honesty” is not surprising given that, according to the book *The Teachings of the Buddha*: “Falsehood is the greatest demeritorious deed while truthfulness is the most beneficial meritorious deed” (Ministry of Information 2007:149). Not lying is also one of the five precepts, and Chan Chan is not alone in considering it the most important (Spiro 1982:99-101). The importance of honesty is also extolled in a number of *jataka*. Furthermore, Chan Chan’s conception of “honesty” was much broader than mere truth telling, and encompassed a wide array of virtues.

In her requests to the Buddha after paying homage to the Triple Gem, Chan Chan asked not that the Buddha grant her “wishes”, but rather that he would give her “the chance” (the agentive space) to be able to achieve her projects for herself. Asking for “the chance” clearly demonstrates that the Buddha is not a “creator God” (e.g. Gombrich 2006:24), and cannot grant ones “prayers” as such. Indeed, whether one has “the chance” to perform these projects or not is not dependent on some controlling hand, but rather on one’s karma due to past cause. Chan Chan was highly critical of those – “most people” – who expected paying homage, making offerings, visiting astrologers – or other practices she considers non-scientific – would grant them earthly riches and success.

*Most of the Myanmar people, they always think, if they want to be rich, or they want to be a success or they want something, at that time, they never try themselves. They worship the pagoda, or the Buddha image, every time... They will pray, they would like to request their wish will be fulfilled very soon. They always do like that. I don't like this way (wincing laughter).*

In emphasizing both the responsibilities and possibilities of human life, Chan Chan was eager to downplay the importance of asking anything from the Buddha. Rather, she insisted this was more a formality of the homage ritual than an expectation that the Buddha could and would be able to offer this opportunity.

*God<sup>59</sup> is just, I think, just help. We are our handler for our life, right. Handler mean lead: we have to lead our life, or we have to do ourselves, right.*

According to the Khin Myo Chit, understanding oneself as an agent is greatly empowering (1995:55–7). In the interpretation of the Burmese-Buddhist discourse which she and Chan Chan – and presumably millions of others – adopt, agency is not only essential to making merit and achieving the right “telos”, but also in the pursuit of mundane world goals (Khin Myo Chit 1995:55–7). Chan Chan appears to adopt a strong version of agency which articulates this Burmese-Buddhist discourse with neoliberal conceptions:

*“...neoliberal agents are responsible for their own futures – they supposedly fashion their own futures through their decisions. By the same token, regardless of their disadvantages and the unequal playing field, actors are maximally responsible for their failures” (Gershon 2011:540).*

At a seminar from a highly regarded Burmese academic, Chan Chan learnt a new conception of agency which she found highly convincing.

*90 percent we have to produce or we have to manage; 10 percent we cannot do, we cannot manage. This 10 percent is for our past time, and old life... (For example), some people (are) not rich, some people is very poor right. This is the 10 percent because of the cause of the previous life. So, we can create 90 percent... That mean, we have to try ourselves.*

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<sup>59</sup> In accordance with Burmese-Buddhist conceptions, despite using the word “God”, Chan Chan told me clearly that Buddha is not God, he is a man. Through such acts of translation, she was acting as a tutor, putting things into a context she knew I could understand. This is also problematic, however, for in making this translation she was not only translating words but also fundamental concepts. This can also easily have the detrimental effect of implying a sameness or similarity which is not existent. A highly educated local man fluent in English told me such translations were often a major problem in English-language books about Burmese conceptions of Buddhism (Field Notes 2014).

For Chan Chan, this narrative is particularly meaningful, and therefore convincing, because it is constructed within the framework of a Burmese-Buddhist ‘truth’, the Law of Karma. This narrative articulates with Buddhist discourses of the individual as highly agentic, creating 90 percent of their cause through their practice in this life. The 10 percent one cannot control is due to one’s karma from previous lives, something one cannot know, and which determines one’s birth position in this life<sup>60</sup>. The narrative is also powerful because it accounts for structural disadvantage of an individual in this life – the respective position of each of us based on gender, poverty, ethnicity, location etc – as due to one’s karma, the price one pays or the reward one reaps for deeds in past lives. Further, in accounting for accidents, sickness and so on as being one’s karma, this articulated model answers a fundamental question in understanding the world which academic concepts of structure/agency ignore. That is, how factors beyond the control of the individual, but other than ‘structure’, profoundly affect their lives and ultimately, their agency. In this model, everything fits within the fundamental law of the universe, cause and effect. Structure and “fate”, the 10 percent, is the effect of past cause. Agency, the 90 percent, is the cause (and effect) one produces now, in this life. As such, while one’s karma from previous lives is beyond the individual’s control and affects this life, one is still responsible for the actions and the path they choose.

This is not an acquiescence of agency: quite the contrary. Chan Chan was strongly rejecting a sort of “fatalism” or passive acceptance she saw in fellow Myanmar (people), in the people who sought success through practices she deemed unscientific, irrational. Chan Chan is not alone in her critique, which appears to be part of a middle-class discourse dismissive of the apparent fatalism of their fellow Burmese. This conception of agency is further imbued with meaning and power because it comes from a Myanmar Buddhist who possesses great prestige, *hpoun* and *awza*<sup>61</sup>.

In portraying herself as an “active” woman who works hard to achieve her goals, Chan Chan has imbued this agency narrative with “authority and truth”, with “meaning” through her practice (Ortner 1999:145). As such, it may function, at least to some extent, as a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, in the pursuit of her projects, Chan Chan is inspired to look for, find and pursue strategies which enable her a sense of agency. Moreover, by attempting to shift the focus to what one does, and away from what one “is” (the subordinate relational roles she is typically ascribed), this narrative is an attempt to circumnavigate hierarchical structures which almost invariably disadvantage her. As such, this “modern” narrative articulated with Burmese-Buddhist discourses<sup>62</sup> offers a meaning-filled, and therefore power-filled, argument to women like Chan Chan. Little wonder it is attractive to her.

### 6.3 Producing herself as a “leader”: duties and ethics

Inherent in her conception/production of herself as an agent, or “leader” as she referred to herself, Chan Chan combines “meaning” and “power”. In the conceptions, which I adopt from Ortner, “meaning” refers to her ‘common sense’ understanding of the world, which she imbues with “authority and truth” through practice, while “power” refers to one’s agentic space and ability to pursue projects (1999:145ff). Chan Chan’s conception of the

<sup>60</sup> As one man told me, it is only through the attainment of certain “knowledge” – which very few people possess – can one know about their past lives (Field Notes 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi has made similar arguments: “(She) has directly challenged the fatalistic interpretation of the doctrine of karma that supports the *hpoun* discourse by emphasizing the importance of present karma (that is, wholesome or unwholesome acts that bear like results) to encourage Burmese people to take a more active role in changing their destiny” (Min Zin 2001: Brackets in original).

<sup>62</sup> There are numerous examples of political actors articulating discourses with Buddhist conceptions as a means of legitimation. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi’s arguments for democracy became meaningful through her Buddhist conceptions of loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) (e.g. Gravers 2012:9, 13; Schober 2005:125).

“leader” is clearly aligned with that of the rightful leader, whose duties are outlined in the *Teachings of the Buddha*.

### “Six kinds of Duty of a Leader

1. He must be more industrious than others.
2. He must be more vigilant in order to lead others.
3. He must be kind to his subordinates.
4. He must forebear and forgive others.
5. He must be considerate and reasonable whatever he does (sic).
6. He must be wise and foresighted in doing things.” (Ministry of Information 2007:258)

In this reading of the rightful leader, “he” has earned the position and power through his hard work, intelligence, honesty, and fair and just practices. Indeed, Chan Chan’s portrayal of herself as a “leader” draws on a powerful political discourse used to legitimise “authoritarianism” at all levels of social organisation (e.g. Maung Maung Gyi 2003:vi; Wells 1.8.2014; Min Zin 2001). Chan Chan started to display her strength and independence, her talent for leadership, from a young age.

*When I was 4 years old, at that time, I depend myself. I never depend (on) the other... I can control myself and I can handle. This is my manner.*

Chan Chan illustrates her abilities as leader in a somewhat heroic narrative of her life, a life in which she has been very “active”, battling with determination to succeed against the odds.

*Til now, I’m the leader of my family, I have to manage everything, I have to make decision, so they are very depend on me. Sometimes it’s not good, I’m not free.*

*(...) So, my life is not, not smooth, and (I) try a lot: not only for me, for the family.*

Inherent in hierarchical relationships are the duties of subordinate and superordinate partners to one another (e.g. Noack 2011:31–2). That is to say, in holding the superordinate position of power in relationships, the “leader” also has ethical and practical responsibilities to “his” subordinates. As a good “leader”, Chan Chan insists that while she has power and agentive space, she “freely” does what she “should” do. Indeed, failing to perform her duties would result in de-legitimising her own claims to agentive space. In other words, in order to retain the validity of the power-filled position she casts herself in, she must perform the “leader” according to the “meaning” she and others ascribe it. As such, and this is a phenomenon central to Chan Chan’s paradoxical understanding of agency, her insistence on “meaning” restricts – though to a lesser degree and in different ways – the agentive space which her insistence on “power” would offer up to her.

Given that a “leader” requires *hpoun*, *awza* and *goun* as legitimation, and the first two attributes are exclusively masculine properties, it is widely considered unnatural for women to be “leaders”. Consequently, in portraying herself as a “leader”, as someone strong and successful<sup>63</sup>, Chan Chan was breaking with “traditional” gender roles (Tharaphi Than 2014:28), and performing a masculine “manner” (Maber 2014:149). Indeed, people often

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<sup>63</sup> Successful women have often been accused of having “adopted male behaviour” (Tharaphi Than 2014:27), although these attitudes appear to be changing, according to Maber (2014:149-50).

told Chan Chan she was actually a man in a woman's body<sup>64</sup>, something she openly agreed with and appeared pleased about, probably because it reaffirmed her understanding of herself. And possibly more so, for the potential hope it may have offered her in the pursuit of a better rebirth.

Ironically, Chan Chan appeared to understand that acting like a "man" had made her more successful as the dutiful daughter, in enabling her to provide for her parents financially. Indeed, while it is also expected of sons to provide financially for their parents, this expectation is not as strong as for daughters. This expectation is made stronger because Chan Chan is the oldest child, and the only daughter. The support Chan Chan provides, not only financially but also emotionally and in the home, has made her parent's highly dependent on her, something which she finds greatly restrictive. This dependence is based in her own, and her parents, expectations of her as a socially appropriate, dutiful daughter. Chan Chan refers to the fulfilment of these duties, of "freely" doing what she "should" do, as being "clever".

*Nobody doesn't need to tell me how should you do, "you should do like that". No need to tell me. I can manage myself very well, I think that's why I have lead my family (laughing) since 17 years old (laughing), Matt (laughing).*

Indeed, acceptance and "love" within the family is contingent on being "clever", on the right performance of her daughterly role. In contrast, Chan Chan and by implication her mother and father, cannot "love" her brother because he fails to carry out his duties as a son and brother.

#### 6.4 An ethical and appropriate woman

The ethical norms which Chan Chan tries to inhabit are fundamental to her entire approach to life, both in her work toward a better rebirth, but also in her attempts to carve out agentive space in the pursuit of her earthly projects. Indeed, her claim to leadership is not only based on her capability and independence, but more profoundly, in her ethical virtue and therefore validity as "leader". As such, the performance of ethics is central to her claim to greater agentive space inside serious games.

For Chan Chan, this means keeping the precepts<sup>65</sup> (*sila*), as well as adherence to the Buddhist ethical virtues she emphasized most strongly: contentment, sympathy and fairness. Indeed, she characterized both herself and others according to the dichotomous ethical sets of Burmese-Buddhism. Whereas she, and her best friend have the right "manner" – they are honest, content, "clever", disciplined, fair, polite, and sympathetic – "most people" are not<sup>66</sup>. Differentiating herself from others through their ethical failures appeared to be, ironically, a common discourse in then Burma (Spiro 1973:281), in contemporary Myanmar, Thailand (Mills 1997:48) and Cambodia (Personal communication: Christenson 2015).

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<sup>64</sup> Discourses of being a man in a biologically female body, or a woman in a male body are not uncommon. Men who are interested in beautifying themselves or are homosexual are often considered to be a woman in a man's body (Field notes 2014), though it is not clear to what extent this is understood literally. In his work on LGBT in Yangon, Gilbert's respondents understood a range of different possibilities (2013:254-61).

<sup>65</sup> The first precept is to refrain from killing. This precept may be interpreted as prescribing vegetarianism. However, the majority of Myanmar, Chan Chan included, interpret this as refraining from the act of killing itself. Thus the butcher breaks the precept, and will generate a lot of bad karma, but the meat-eater does not.

<sup>66</sup> Personal Communication: Psychodynamic and Gestalt psychotherapist: "Chan Chan could be said to operate from a position of high moral standards. These can be exhausting for a person especially because of the emotional conflict and anger or resentment towards others" (2015).

“Today many people are void of moral shame and dread (hiri and ottapa) so that they dress, eat and behave indecently. If this moral decay continues to proliferate, the world will end soon in complete ruin” (Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa 1999:82–84 cited in Noack 2011:212).

Chan Chan’s narrative is part of wider middle-class understandings of themselves as protectors of “real” Buddhism and morality in a society in the midst of moral decline “brought on by foreign media and consumerism” (Schober 1995:317). Indeed, the production of the ‘self’ and the desire to live in accordance with a particular model of ethical behaviour play a significant role in how Chan Chan does life, something far from unique to her.

“This intense identification with religion and the pride people take in it result in moral obligations that determine many decisions in life” (Noack 2011:211).

In chapter 9 I develop this further.

## 6.5 A professional woman

Another key aspect of Chan Chan’s production of herself as a “leader” is her career as a “modern”, professional woman. For Chan Chan and women like her, professional life appears especially important because it offers merit-based opportunities which may help her overcome, at least to some degree, the age and gender hierarchies which restrict their agency in other areas of life (cf. Khin Myo Chit 1995:204).

*Because (women) cannot accept the difference between lady and man.  
That’s why they try hard, and gradually they got the high position, they  
got good salary, they got (more) confidence than before.*

Through her hard work, Chan Chan had already enjoyed success in her fourth goal, to develop her career. This success in the professional environment – and previously in her education – was a central element of her belief in herself as an intelligent, capable woman: a “leader” both at work and at home. A number of other studies have also reported similar findings about the importance of work in women’s lives (e.g. Chaw Chaw 2003:222; in Thailand: Mills 1997:40).

“The factory women’s visible contribution to the household in cash or in kind improves their status within their families as well as their own self esteem. Most women claim to be better treated as a result of their contribution to household income and have a greater say in the family... (This) not only enhances their sense of pride and self-esteem, but possibly strengthens their bargaining position (within the family)” (Chaw Chaw 2003:222: my brackets).

In 2012, Chan Chan was offered a job as a quality control manager at a clothing factory on the outskirts of Yangon. This position was an excellent opportunity for her, offering her a high level of responsibility, and twice her then salary. Doubling her income would have been a great step forward in her career project, and would obviously have meant more money for herself. It would also have enabled to make more merit by providing financially for her family better, and allowed her to make larger donations (*dana*). However, at the time Chan Chan was offered the job, her mother was gravely ill.

*Sometime we have to choose what we should choose right... Ah, I cannot  
at that time, I shouldn’t accept for me (just for myself). I should choose  
how my mum is, at that time she’s the priority right. If I choose my desire,  
I can stay (work) there at their factory, I can get a higher salary, and I*

*can do whatever I want, or whatever I can, whatever my decision. But, at last, I didn't choose (that).*

Chan Chan chose to stay at her job because it was important for and expected of her that she spend time at home looking after her mother, emotionally and physically. Nevertheless, while Chan Chan was “clever” or chose what she “should”, she repeatedly emphasized that this was her decision as a “leader”. Indeed, her insistence that she performed her duties “freely” needs to be understood in the context of popular Burmese-Buddhist conceptions in which actions are only considered meritorious (or demeritorious) when they are “freely” performed (Lehman 2005:1332). Given that taking care of one’s parents is a merit-making method par excellence, it is not surprising then that insistence on the “free” performance of one’s duties appears to be common. All respondents in Chaw Chaw’s study of women who moved to the city to work in clothing factories, and thereby to support their families, also stated that they had “chosen” to do so themselves (2003:215). As stated above, for young women like Chan Chan, “love” and acceptance inside and outside the home appears contingent on being “clever”, on the “free” performance on one’s duties. Failure to perform these duties “freely” will likely lead to them being shamed or even ostracized, two apparently common methods of parental and elder control over children (Noack 2011:213). Finally, Chan Chan’s decision reiterates that while women are able to work professionally, it is expected that, first-and-foremost, they will perform their “traditional” role in the home (cf. Khin Myo Chit 1995:204). In short, women have a *double burden*.

These paradoxes are at the heart of the Burmese-Buddhist discourse of agency – and the subjective paradox. That is, she is “free” in this life to be the right kind of person, a “true” Buddhist. Should she choose not to fulfil her duties “freely”, she can expect enormous pressure from her parents and others to be the right kind of “free” woman.

## 6.6 Born a “leader”

Chan Chan linked her leadership and need to make her own decisions to the stubbornness of Monday born children.

*Monday born: special for me. We are not allowed to (let) the other people decide. We decide ourselves.*

However, Chan Chan’s explanation of what it means to be Monday born seemed to be somewhat ad hoc<sup>67</sup>. While I could find reference to Monday born being “organized persons” (Meiji Soe 2014:59) and “jealous” (Scott 1896:5), it was Tuesday born children who were “stubborn” (Meiji Soe 2014:59)<sup>68</sup>. Indeed, after a long description of the Monday born which essentially mirrored her presentation of herself, she said that these factors were only relevant to her. Other Monday born people, she said, were completely different. That

<sup>67</sup> I found it very difficult to gauge how important days of the week were in Chan Chan’s understandings. Chan Chan and her friend seemed to treat the days of the week as unimportant. Chan Chan said that the zodiac was more important than the day of the week. Nevertheless, she considered Saturday births – in line with popular discourse – to be particularly ominous. The Saturday born dragon (*naga*) is likely to bring the parents extreme bad luck. Today caesarean sections may be performed to avoid having a Saturday child (Neumann 2014:104). Chan Chan told me about one her friends who was a *naga*. “Her friend who is sensitive is also a dragon. When she is at the ocean, she can hear voices calling her to join them in the water. This is dangerous because she probably cannot swim. A dragon is almost certainly doomed to die young. Her friend went to the astrologer. The astrologer said that if she wants to live long, she has to cut the string (Chan Chan points to her arm). The string connects her line of lives, I assume. There are things she can do to cut the string. The astrologer told her about them. She has not done those things though” (Field Notes 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Chan Chan also told me that “Monday means money”. Monday born, Tigers, are considered to be good in business (Noack 2014:98).

is to say, Chan Chan's employment of the Monday born narrative appeared to naturalise what she saw as her true character, that of a born "leader".

### 6.7 Producing herself through differentiation from others

Chan Chan's construction of herself as a "leader" is based on her meaning-filled differentiation of herself from others along clear binaries. "Most people" "pretend", are selfish, "naughty" (fail to perform their duties), "lazy", "passive", unethical, obsessed only with this world (*lokiya*) and expect to have their wishes fulfilled for them. She is the opposite: "honest", selfless in helping others, "clever" (dutiful), determined, "active", pursuing her goals without the expectation of supernatural assistance, and concerned about her next life. Further, she has long shown she was a "leader", and naturalises her claim by her Monday birth. In short, Chan Chan produces herself as a person primarily through her differentiation from and superiority over others.

"This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be Constructed. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected. Every identity has at its 'margin', an excess, something more (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993)" (Hall 1996:4–5).

It is through this production of herself as an agent who performs discursively produced ideals "better" than others that Chan Chan attempts to legitimise her claims to leadership, and thereby to carve out greater agentive spaces than her gendered, relational roles would allow<sup>69</sup>.

### 6.8 Summary

Possessing neither *hpoun* nor *awza*, women are typically ascribed (and ascribe themselves) roles lacking power in their relationships with men. In general, Chan Chan's status as a young, unmarried woman (*apyou*) means she is often expected to perform subordinate roles, roles imbued with limited power and agentive space. In emphasizing a Western, neo-liberal narrative articulated with a meaningful Burmese-Buddhist agency discourse, Chan Chan seeks to open up greater agentive spaces by focusing not on what she *is* (her various prescribed roles), but what she *does*. In fulfilling the duties of a "leader", Chan Chan not only produces herself as already agentive, but also attempts to demonstrate her right to agentive space which her roles would preclude her. In short, she is constantly and actively (re)negotiating her agentive space inside relationships in order to pursue her own intentions, goals, projects. The practice, success and limitations of these negotiations is the focus of the following chapters.

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<sup>69</sup> This is not without paradox. For in her identity as Myanmar (nationality) at a group level, the same people who she differentiates herself from as an individual become her in-group. In this instance, she takes up nationalist discourse of being a 'true' Buddhist, and therefore a 'true' Myanmar, a group identity superior to non-Buddhists/foreigners inside the country, and the West (cf. Noack 2011:211).

## 7. MY RELATIONSHIP WITH CHAN CHAN

For me, one of the most interesting, challenging and confusing aspects of my relationship with Chan Chan was trying to understand our shifting relational roles. Over time, I realized that her changes in practice in different situations revealed not only her sensitivity to surrounds but also to appropriate modes of behaviour, as a woman with a man, a local to a Westerner, and her place in contextualized, shifting hierarchies. While such shifting contextual roles are not unique to Myanmar, examining them helps reveal the different societal norms Chan Chan “inhabits” (Mahmood 2005), and how she performs “suitable feminine behaviour” (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:21) while pursuing her goals in praxis. In this chapter, I also look at how Chan Chan saw herself and me, how this affected our relationship, the access she provided to me, her production of herself.

### 7.1 Relational and contextual understanding

The office layout at the NGO where we worked together played a significant role in my relationship with Chan Chan. I sat in a corner next to her in the 25 square metre room. Beside her, though facing in our direction, sat a 25 year old European man who was essentially the second in charge at the foundation. Beside him, in the corner opposite from me, sat a Burmese woman who was effectively the manager of the local staff. In the next room, equally as large, was the manager’s office, which also had a large boardroom table. There was also a small kitchen, where the full-time “maid”, a Burmese woman, made coffee and tea. During my first few days, Chan Chan seemed pleasant, shy, and apparently uninterested and unwilling to speak to me, despite my attempts to engage her in conversation. After being at the office over a week – and to my total surprise – she suddenly barraged me with questions.

The questions would soon become familiar to me as formulaic introductions in Myanmar. These questions are important in categorizing the other, thereby understanding one’s appropriate relational role, including who is (or should be) the superordinate or subordinate partner (Fink 2001:120). They also serve to evaluate the appropriateness of the other socially and ethically, depending on how they perform the role appropriate to their prescribed hierarchical position. I, like many Westerners, would quickly learn which answers were ‘good’ and which were ‘bad’ – and I began adopting favourable identifications to fit these normative expectations.

After asking my age, Chan Chan asked me if I was married. This was also asked by men and women alike, and given that I was 35, it was getting late to be married. To strangers who I would never see again, I generally told them I was, thereby avoiding a treatise due to my inappropriate situation. She then asked me which day of the week I

was born. Like many Westerners, I didn't know. I told Chan Chan my date of birth, which she immediately googled. She told me I was Friday born, and laughed nervously, as she often did. She told me Obama is Friday born, and so is Thein Sein, the president. Laughing, Chan Chan told me that Friday people talk too much. On being asked what religion I was, I replied Christian, as I always did. My answer was greeted with some form of approval, I cannot remember exactly. I was rewarded for omitting the atheism part, and perhaps even more importantly, for not being Muslim. I had passed the first test, I was fairly 'good' for a Westerner, a relatively socially appropriate man. On later reflecting on my own role from a serious games perspective, I had clearly learned over time how important this ascription was to our relationship. As such, I endeavoured to maintain and produce myself as socially appropriate throughout my time in Myanmar, not only in relation to Chan Chan, but in a variety of different relationships.

## 7.2 Hierarchy

The first question Chan Chan asked me was: "How old are you?". This question is vital, as age is a key component in hierarchical relationships (e.g. Fink 2001:120). This hierarchy is reinforced by relational terms such as younger brother or aunty.

"In conventional everyday parlance Myanmar people do define themselves largely through the different roles they take up and this is expressed verbally by the use of relational terms such as 'brother', 'sister', 'daughter', 'uncle', 'master', 'servant' etc. instead of the personal pronouns 'I', 'you', 'me', 'mine' and 'your'" (Noack 2011:32)<sup>70</sup>.

However, as these terms indicate, age is not the only factor in determining one's hierarchical position: gender and *hpoun*, religion, prestige (*goun*), education, employment and position, economic and social status, and ethnicity are also important (e.g. Maung Maung Gyi 1983; Mi Mi Khaing 1984; Spiro 1973; Noack 2011). Indeed, hierarchy is a key factor in nearly all relationships and settings in Myanmar, be they private or public. As such, it is essential to know one's relative position, as it is considered particularly offensive and inappropriate to breach hierarchical protocols (*ana*) (e.g. Fink 2001:120)<sup>71</sup>.

I had initially failed to understand what this hierarchy meant in practice. After our initial conversation, and having interpreting Chan Chan's initial reticence to speak to me as shyness, I tried to talk to her over the following days. Again, she ignored me. A week later, she once again engaged me in a long conversation. Only then did I realize that the presence of the (female) Burmese manager in the office made it problematic, if not impossible for Chan Chan to talk to me. Indeed, her manager effectively prohibited the local workers from non-work related communication with my European supervisor and I. The manager would also repeatedly and openly berate the local workers, especially the NGO's full-time (male) driver<sup>72</sup>. Likewise, I repeatedly saw expats knowingly exploit positions of power, as

<sup>70</sup> A Western psychotherapist asked me what Chan Chan's sense of the 'self' was, because Chan Chan appeared to only speak about herself in relational roles (Personal communication: Psychodynamic and Gestalt psychotherapist 2015). In his critique on anthropological notions of the 'self', Spiro (1993b:112-3, 119-21) argued powerfully that his interlocutors had a very definite concept of the 'self'. In Chapters 9, I argue that while the idea of a 'self' may differ to popular Western understandings of some form of 'true' inner self, a 'self' is fundamental to understanding the work Chan Chan performs on the 'self', and to her supramundane project, a better rebirth.

<sup>71</sup> Once again, I find my own observations strengthened by Spiro's data, even 50 years later and in an urban setting. "It is remarkable to observe these shifts from arrogance to subservience in the same person as he passes from a structurally defined subordinate status to a superordinate one, sometimes within an interval of a few minutes" (1973, 282).

<sup>72</sup> While women must pay deference to men on account of men's inherent *hpoun* (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:21), the example of the female Burmese boss demonstrates how other factors, in this case her workplace and social position, can override gender or age in a professional setting.

did Myanma locals, where powerful men (and occasionally women) appeared to take great pleasure in barking at or humiliating “subordinates”<sup>73</sup>. I found myself often disgusted by these frequent, open and aggressive displays of power. For local people, I assume that they are likely to be profoundly humiliating, a breach of *ana*, experienced as an attack on the very ‘self’ (cf. Fink 2001:120; Noack 2011:32).

The complexity of my own hierarchical relationship with Chan Chan would only become clear to me as we got to know each other in a variety of settings. At work, I was the intern, with little working knowledge of the country and unable to speak the language. In contrast, she was the experienced, capable accountant and translator. Nevertheless, in the presence of others, Chan Chan treated me as a superior, with merit and experience taking a secondary role to other power dynamics – namely my gender, age, whiteness, ability to speak European languages, and my association with the Europeans who held the two highest positions. Further, by local and foreign office outsiders alike, I was clearly ascribed a more important position in the hierarchy than Chan Chan. However, in our meetings outside the confines of the professional world, our hierarchical relationship to one another would flip.

Over time, I was forced to reinterpret what I had initially viewed as Chan Chan’s erratic and moody character. I came to understand that she could easily move between different hierarchical roles inside our relationship, as the situation and circumstances changed. Within appropriate norms, she sought to take control of a situation, to act as the “leader” she viewed herself as. What may be viewed as submissiveness in the workplace could also be understood as Chan Chan, a socially embedded subject, understanding and performing her ascribed role within the limits of the serious game. Indeed, as I developed my own understanding of these games, I too would become an increasingly successful player.

### 7.3 The tutor and the student

In the course of the many workplace conversations I had with Chan Chan, I demonstrated a clear interest in learning more about Buddhism. During these conversations, which took place only when Chan Chan and I (and the “maid” who sat silently by) were present, I had both wittingly and unwittingly cast myself in the position of pupil and Chan Chan as tutor. It quickly became clear to me that Chan Chan enjoyed performing the tutor, allowing her to share her knowledge with an eager student, and the power that the role/situation offered her. Indeed, with little prompting, she would talk in great detail, but stop immediately once someone else entered the office. During one such conversation, I told her I was going to visit Shwedagon with an expat she also knew. Chan Chan then invited me to join her and her best friend on a trip to the pagoda. I gladly accepted. In the interviews, Chan Chan’s enjoyment of the superordinate role would become even clearer to me when she proudly recounted her work as a Chinese language–tutor and as a study guide for “lazy”, “naughty” students. Her skill, competence and hard–work also, of course, contributed to her production of herself as a “leader”.

In our relationship, it was during our visit to Shwedagon that I first became aware of Chan Chan taking on a clearly superordinate role. We took a bus together to the pagoda on the full moon day of Wagaung. I was bent over, my head pressed against the ceiling of the packed and jerking bus. I felt all eyes on me, the over–sized, sweaty foreigner with the local woman. Throughout the short and unpleasant trip, Chan Chan repeatedly told me I was in standing in other people’s way, that I was taking up too much room, that I was clumsy. She also paid our fares. In doing so, Chan Chan clearly demonstrated to the others on the bus

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<sup>73</sup> From a psychodynamic perspective, Spiro argued that “many Burmese” have a fundamentally “authoritarian character structure” which is reinforced by constantly shifting hierarchical status. According to him, these are both “part and parcel, albeit different facets, of one personality structure” (1973, 282). Maung Maung Gyi reached similar conclusions (1983:v).

– primarily women, teenagers and children – that she was the leader–mother–tutor in our relationship. One reason she did this may have been that she was merely performing the role of “leader”, and that was acceptable or appropriate in the situation. While I was a man, and she should not undermine a man’s *hpoun* in public, I was nevertheless foreign (and thereby perhaps low in *hpoun*) and the audience included few men. As such, the situation afforded her this role. In my performance, perhaps I was conforming to her expectations of men as somewhat ridiculous and incompetent, and she was mocking me to the other women. This may also have been an attempt to perform the socially appropriate woman, to distance herself from me in order to show we were not in a relationship or on a date. Then again, she may simply have been distancing herself from the embarrassment I was causing her, especially given my somewhat unkempt appearance in contrast to her perfect dress. Most probably, it was a mix of all these factors.

At the pagoda and away from a direct audience, I found Chan Chan to be increasingly overbearing. I was under constant orders: where to stand, how to stand, where to put my hands when having photos taken, what to do with my bag. When I carelessly used the word “crazy” to describe two pieces of wood on display because the lick of flames on them showed the form of a pagoda, she chastised me as a naughty child. I noted in my diary:

“I thought it (the patterns on the wood) was intentional, but am assured it was not. “A little miracle”, the man beside me says to me in English, “a little miracle”. It’s hard not to agree. Apparently I say crazy. Chan Chan scolds me when we go outside. She says, you cannot say crazy, it is not crazy! You can say amazing, she says, you can say stunning, she says, you cannot say crazy. It is not crazy, she says. I try to explain that crazy does not mean that, not that the people are crazy, rather that it is in this sense it is something we cannot explain. She doesn’t want to hear me, she doesn’t want to hear crazy” (Field notes 2014).<sup>74</sup>

Away from a workplace audience, and therefore the need to perform social appropriateness in this context, in a space that she was more at home than I was, and in which she was freer to produce herself with me alone, or for an audience of Myanmar strangers, Chan Chan took up greater agentive space in assuming the superordinate role, the role which was “naturally” hers.

#### 7.4 Men and women, superordinate and subordinate roles

Chan Chan’s openness with me, the confirmation of some sort of “friendship” through the invitation to the pagoda, and my increasing awareness of our shifting relationality made me eager to interview her. While she readily agreed, she expressed great anxiety about her expertise or right to tell me things, and worried especially about giving me “wrong” answers<sup>75</sup>. To ensure she was comfortable and allow her to control the situation as much as possible (which I had learned was crucial through the pagoda visit), I assured her it was not a test, that I did not want to learn about the facts of Buddhism but rather wanted to learn how Buddhism was important in her life, and asked her to tell me when and where we should meet.

While Chan Chan produced herself as a “leader” who therefore sought to take control of situations when and where possible, her “natural” inclination to leadership was tempered by appropriate roles inside hierarchical relationships. Early on in our relationship, she displayed a distinctive submissiveness toward me. During our first conversation, she had told me that she was learning German. Eager to establish a good connection with her, later

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<sup>74</sup> The appropriate words for referring to sacred objects and images are clearly defined in the state’s official guide to Buddhism (Ministry of Information 2007:109).

<sup>75</sup> As Chan Chan was anxious about speaking for all Burmese people, I have similar anxieties about my right to represent her. These questions of representation are discussed in Chapter 10.

that week I gave her a USB-stick with a number of language lessons on it. Returning the stick, she handed it back to me not with the standard and polite extension of the left arm with the other touching the elbow, but with two hands. This is the highest form of respect possible, and is typically only performed in formal situations or when offering a monk an object.

I remember being somewhat surprised by this gesture, interpreting it as an indication of distancing, that friendship between us would not be possible. It became clear to me, through this and other incidents, that “access” to Chan Chan would also be a challenge for me, as it was for male anthropologists studying women (e.g. Berliner and Falen 2008:138-9). While I was able to build up a working relationship with Chan Chan, I did face a number of barriers which I could never have hoped to overcome. This was later confirmed when I realised that the intern who followed me, a younger woman, quickly enjoyed a closer relationship than was possible between Chan Chan and myself. While the level of access I was permitted was greatly restricted on account of my gender, age, and marital status<sup>76</sup>, I do not consider it a valid argument against men studying women in general. There are a number of factors at play.

A number of female researchers have found that they have had access to male domains of which men could not have the equivalent amongst women (e.g. Baum 2008:157; Personal communication: Peselmann 2015). However, men of different ages and marital status are granted different levels of access to groups of women, as Baum so clearly found over his 30-year-period of fieldwork in Senegal (2008:176). Likewise, being a woman studying women, or being the same ethnicity as “informants” does not automatically guarantee better access or more cooperative interview partners (Berliner & Falen 2008:138-9). Rather, understanding the significance of relationality and context illustrates that researchers of different identities – gender, age, ethnicity, religion, marital status and so on – draw out different practices and productions of the self in personal interactions with their interview partners. This example illustrates how Chan Chan’s cultural and personal projections onto my (imagined) identity promoted her to produce a different self than she would have for a woman, an ethnically similar other, and so on. An exclusive focus on the roles ascribed the researcher by interlocutors would be anomalous in a study on agency, as it obliterates one’s own ability as a researcher to play serious games. Indeed, this chapter demonstrates how my successes or failures in actively negotiating with Chan Chan inside these games clearly played a vital role in our relationship, and therefore how and what she communicated to me. In other words, a host of other factors such as whether or not Chan Chan found me to be sympathetic, friendly, open, intelligent, willing to listen, enjoyable to be around, able to offer her something and so on were also important in the research materials I gathered.

As such, I interpret the way Chan Chan gave me the USB stick respectfully as the production of a certain ideal of Burmese ‘feminine’ submissiveness to me as an (older) man, a possessor of *hpoun*. The importance of *hpoun*, though she never used the word (probably out of a desire to be understandable for me), became clear to me when Chan Chan told me what she was looking for in a husband. In light of the socially appropriate techniques Chan Chan used to be found by a man, which I develop further in the following chapter, it has been suggested to me that one of her motivations for being interviewed was to gauge my appropriateness as a husband (Personal communication: Lauser 2015). Indeed, for this reason, a colleague also suggested to me that interviewing her was a bad idea. This is an issue sometimes encountered by male and female researchers alike (e.g. Kulick 2008:191), and I had thought about the possibility, especially in light of this specific incidence of submissiveness toward me. However, I dismissed it as unlikely and, at most,

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<sup>76</sup> “Access” to other women who were significantly older than me appears as though it would have been less of a challenge. Sexual orientation almost certainly also plays a role, though I am not sure how a different orientation would have affected my relationship with Chan Chan.

inconvenient. As a Friday born Westerner<sup>77</sup>, not at all fitting Chan Chan's profile of an appropriate husband, I felt reassured by my profound unsuitability. Rather, I believe Chan Chan had other projects and obligations that were more compelling motivations for being interviewed which demonstrate that, as an agent, she was pursuing her own goals. I turn to these now.

## 7.5 Interview setting and motivations

Chan Chan decided I should interview her in one of the loud, busy shopping malls that have popped in Yangon over the past 25 years. Located across the road from the Kaba Aye Pagoda, in a suburban centre of the city, and unlike some of the malls downtown, it caters to an (almost) exclusively local clientele<sup>78</sup>. Meeting in the shopping mall is nevertheless understood as a symbol of modernity and affluence (Noack 2011:234). When Chan Chan arrived at the busy entrance of the mall where I awaited her, she went inside having barely said hello. I followed her, and she led us to some cafes at the far end of the mall. I tried to speak with her, but she kept walking. I understood that she did not want to be seen with me, and I walked some distance behind her. This was the same on each occasion as we entered and left the mall. Initially I had wondered how an interview was going to work when we could not be seen together.

Inside the café, however, she talked openly with me. As a semi-private space, the café appeared to provide the right environment for a foreign man and a local woman to sit together. The microphones on the table, and me sitting with pen and notepad in hand probably also made her more comfortable, suggesting that it was not a date, despite the mall clearly being a dating venue on a Saturday afternoon<sup>79</sup>. Our presence together drew bemused looks from the waitress and other patrons. Chan Chan told her, and curious others at different times, that I was conducting an interview. I believe this rendered the situation appropriate and made her a 'good' woman.

In reflecting on, listening to and contextualising the interviews, a number of motivations for Chan Chan's decision to take part in the interviews became apparent. Firstly, she appeared to take great delight in being interviewed by a Western 'academic', affirming her status as someone interesting and important, and thereby offering her a form of minor celebrity, particularly on the 'modern' stage of a shopping mall cafe. She also had the waitress take photos of us, which she posted on facebook at the end of the first interview (see facebook post at start of this paper). The photos and caption enabled her to present herself as an interesting, intelligent, and helpful woman, thereby enhancing her social prestige. Further, like so many people, Chan Chan seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk to and to teach me not only about herself, but also about Myanmar "culture" and Buddhism. I was, after all, an especially intent, eager and largely uninterrupted listener who allowed Chan Chan to take on the superordinate role. In fact, at times when I was exhausted, she insisted that we continue because I still had questions. Moreover, Chan Chan repeatedly stressed that she wanted to "help me" (as she also did in the facebook post), which she told me was an essential element of being a 'true' Buddhist. That is, she wished to fulfil her desire and perceived obligation to "help" me. This is tied to the key concept of *ana* which compels one to help others when they need or seek it (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:22). As such,

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<sup>77</sup> A potential union between a Monday and Friday born spells certain disaster according to Myanmar astrology. In the apparently well known rhymes about the days of the week: "Friday's daughter/Didn't oughter/Marry with a Monday's son/Should she do it/Both will rue it/Life's last lap will soon be run". The result would be the same if the son were born Friday, and the daughter Monday (Scott 1896, 8; Khin Myo Chit 1995:16). Nevertheless, if adults born on badly matched days are to marry, ceremonies can be performed to avoid certain disaster.

<sup>78</sup> The complete lack of quality cheeses in the mall supermarket indicated that it was aimed exclusively at local clientele (Field notes 2014).

<sup>79</sup> The shopping mall is a "stage to look 'modern' and fashionable" (Noack 2011:234).

rather than using the interview situation as a socially appropriate opportunity to assess my potential as a husband, I believe Chan Chan had a different set of motivations or goals.

### 7.6 The tutor and the student: Power and powerlessness in the field

Clutching her handbag tightly on her lap, and with a tendency to repeat herself when nervous, Chan Chan told me two or three times that she had never been interviewed about her life before. With the intention of building further trust and relaxing her, I tried to cast her in the superordinate role, repeating that I was interested in learning about the importance of Buddhism in *her* life, and in *her* understandings of the world. Starting with the question, “Tell me about your life” offered Chan Chan an opportunity to take control from the outset by speaking openly and without interruption. She became the tutor/expert<sup>80</sup> as she had done on other occasions, and I the student (or possibly even the “lady” to her, the “man”). Accepting the subordinate role on my behalf also felt somewhat “natural”, reflecting the distinct lack of power I felt in this situation. As Crapanzano said in his interviews with Tuhami, it became clear that it was his role to simply listen (1980:47). Later in the interviews, I became occasionally frustrated with Chan Chan’s domineering role, especially when she did not answer my questions. I was often unsure if she had not understood the words I had chosen, or because she found the questions stupid, irrelevant or did not want to share certain things with me. In any case, Chan Chan often answered questions she had more or less posed herself. Despite her sometimes long-winded tangents, Chan Chan’s assumption of the superordinate role within the interview also revealed that she was often a better interviewer than I could have been<sup>81</sup>.

Being offered and taking control of the interview allowed Chan Chan to control her production of herself for her audience: me. This method opened up the opportunity for her, as intended, to expand on her key understandings of her world. In doing so, it also allowed her to pose herself a number of questions that I lacked the in-depth understanding to ask. One key revelation throughout the interviews was her repeated emphasis on the importance of performing ethically and socially appropriately. That is, in the “free” performance of one’s duties, either as the subordinate or superordinate partner, within relationships. I have no doubt that these conceptions of hierarchical reciprocity played a key role in Chan Chan’s understanding of our interview relationship. As the subordinate partner, it was my role to listen, to be an eager and respectful student. As the tutor/superordinate partner, Chan Chan endeavoured to fulfil her obligations to me by teaching me as much as she could, and by being an “honest”, “open” interview partner. Indeed, Chan Chan’s insistence on continuing the first interview as I still had unanswered questions, and her offer to do a third interview despite being very busy, was the proper and “free” fulfilment of her duty to “help” me.

### 7.7 Not just a man, a “stranger” too (with his strange language)

Prior to the interviews, I had been afraid that appropriate shyness would prohibit Chan Chan from being open and honest with me. Not only was I repeatedly surprised by what she was willing to reveal to me, Chan Chan later told me she also was herself, that much of what she had said she had only ever told her closest friends, all of whom were obviously

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<sup>80</sup> An issue with Chan Chan assuming the tutor role was that I was occasionally unsure in which capacity Chan Chan was speaking. Were these her own opinions? Or was she talking about Myanmar “culture”, “tradition” or beliefs in general?

<sup>81</sup> Having ascribed Chan Chan - or allowed her the space to take up - the superordinate position from the outset of the interviews, I later realised how restricted my own agentive space had become. As such, I often found it difficult to get answers to specific questions.

women. I am convinced that my identity as an outsider, one not involved intimately in her life and about to leave the country, helped facilitate her willingness to disclose things to me (cf. Reinholz & Chase 2002:231). Georg Simmel would have referred to my status in Chan Chan's eyes as that of the Stranger:

“(The Stranger) often receives the most surprising openness – confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person” (Simmel 1971:3).

Taking on the role of student was certainly only possible for an outsider with a plausible claim to ignorance. I was the non-confrontational stranger/student – I did my best to cover any surprise, distaste or disagreement with whatever Chan Chan said – encouraging her to produce herself as she herself wanted. Not only would Chan Chan have produced a different self for “more similar” interviewers, they likely would not have been accommodated this level of “openness”. Had Chan Chan been interviewed by a Myanmar man, for example, both would have been more aware of the consequences and contexts of what she was saying, and it may have been more difficult for him to accept things in the interested but unattached, ‘academic’ manner that I had attempted to maintain.

Indeed, there were times when I felt somewhat torn about, or even exploitative, in my attempts to maintain the role of the distanced academic. This was especially so as I found Chan Chan to be a sympathetic, generous, “honest” and “open” interview partner, revealing the great pressures and stress she felt under, especially in relation to her parents. Given that Chan Chan had her own motivations to take part in the interviews, and despite my caveats above, I believe that her willingness to take part in and continue the interviews suggest that she did not see my distance or objectives as exploitative. Furthermore, it is possible that simply in listening and taking an interest beyond the bounds of Chan Chan's other relationships, except those with her closest friends, the interviews could have even be experienced by Chan Chan as a highly positive, even “life changing” experience<sup>82</sup> (Personal Communication: Psychodynamic and Gestalt psychotherapist 2016). At times, I felt a professional distance unsustainable and inhuman, and did attempt to offer some comfort when Chan Chan appeared particularly distressed<sup>83</sup>.

Communicating in the language of the stranger, English, obviously restricted Chan Chan's ability to express herself, as she told me. However, based on my own experiences speaking German, I believe it may have also had a somewhat inverse effect. That is, when speaking German I have repeatedly noted that I find myself comfortable expressing opinions or revealing information about myself which I would not have done in English, my native language. It was as if German words were just noises, lacking depth of meaning, distant from my ‘inner’ self in a way that English words were not. German permitted me a level of ‘openness’ which my native language did not. In other words, I believe that the stranger, the stranger's language and the strange setting (the staged interview), created a distance from Chan Chan's ‘normal’ life and relationships which facilitated a greater degree of openness and honesty with me.

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<sup>82</sup> By this the Psychodynamic and Gestalt psychotherapist (2016) meant that for Chan Chan “...in telling her story to an interested, empathetic person she experienced herself speaking the truths, the realities of her life and was strengthened by this and able to have different thoughts and feelings about herself that brought change”.

<sup>83</sup> Later, on reading *Tuhami*, I became particularly interested in Crapanzano attempts to remain “scientific” and distant, and his ultimate decision to give up such a pretence because he had come to feel compassion for Tuhami and the problems he was having (1980).

## 7.8 Summary: Situational performance and image

As I have argued throughout, Chan Chan's awareness of contexts and the level of control they offered her in producing herself to outsiders radically affected her behaviour toward me. Her ability to clearly present our meeting in the café as an interview facilitated the establishment of the power dynamic she desired, one in which she was able to assume a superordinate position. In the bus, Chan Chan attempted to control the presentation of the situation by paying, and by openly instructing me as a mother or tutor would, rather than as a socially inappropriate woman on an unchaperoned date with a foreigner. Together with her and her best friend at the pagoda, the suggestion of a date was also dramatically diminished, and the possibility of an unchaperoned one excluded. Both were thereby freed to speak with me. Her distancing herself from me while walking through the mall may have been because it would have been difficult, even impossible, for her to present the situation as appropriate, as anything other than a date.

Seen in this light, Chan Chan's apparently changing performances appear much more coherent and consistent (though not without paradox), when viewed as intentional performances of Burmese-Buddhist "feminine" ideals such as shyness and innocence. The intentional, though not necessarily conscious ability to take on different roles (Mills 1997:41), and awareness of proper performance in different microsocial situations, is a decisive factor in successfully playing serious games. From my Western background, I had initially viewed these performances as inconsistent, as superficial, for show only. This was a blinkered perspective. In the Burmese-Buddhist understanding of the person Chan Chan ascribed to, performance is understood not only as show, but to be who one really is. As such, the performance of appropriate roles is not only socially desirable/necessary, it is not only a *display* of who Chan Chan is, it is indeed who she *is*.

## 8. COMPETING PROJECTS: DUTY TO PARENTS, BECOMING A “WOMAN”

***“The ideal set-up for the relationship of children to parents is chit-kyauk-yothay a ‘love-fear-respect’ compound...” (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:19)***

In this chapter, I turn my attention to a conflict which was central to Chan Chan’s life at the time of the interviews, that of two of her projects: to look after her parents, and to find a husband and start her own family. In the interviews, Chan Chan told me that her parents were against her marrying and leaving home because they were dependent on her. In attempting to “keep” her at home, Chan Chan’s parents’ challenged her production of herself as a “leader”, and created a conflict of culturally embedded ideal roles for Chan Chan, one to be an appropriate daughter, the other to become a ‘woman’. For Chan Chan, finding a resolution to this conflict was growing increasingly urgent. The then 33-year-old was at a fork in the road: Either to meet, marry and start a family with a man, or to remain a single, childless woman. Adopting a “serious games” approach (Ortner 1996; 1999; 2006), I look at how Chan Chan and her parents navigate and draw on “regimes of truth” (Mahmood 2005:121) around hierarchy and power, filial and parental duty, and different conceptions of womanhood in the pursuit of their own projects. This shows the limits of her possibilities as a daughter to be both socially appropriate and a “leader”, fundamentally undermining the production of herself as a powerful agent. In other words, the agentive spaces Chan Chan claims for herself cannot be realised in practice. Moving beyond the conflict with her parents in the second section of this chapter, I focus on her attempts to meet a man, and the ways in which societal discourses on appropriate ‘femininity’ once again limit the agentive self she produces. I then look at the methods Chan Chan employs when her perceived agency has reached its limits. Finally, I investigate paradoxes inherent in her vision of herself with a potential husband, contextualising them in broader Burmese-Buddhist discourses on masculinity and femininity.

### 8.1 The duties of daughters and sons

***“Sons and daughters must attend closely to their parents in order to provide them with all the requisites in life.” The First Duty of Sons and Daughters in The Teaching of the Buddha (Ministry of Information 2007:251).***

In hegemonic Burmese-Buddhist discourse, which Chan Chan referred to as “tradition”, it is the highest duty of children to repay their debt<sup>84</sup>, and a girl, and based on her anecdotes, Chan Chan was almost certainly raised to take on “family responsibilities from a young age” (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:19), a duty that will persist throughout her life (Chaw Chaw 2003:212). While it was also the duty of sons to provide for their parents, these expectations appear to be higher for daughters (e.g. Chaw Chaw 2003:211; Mason 1992 cited in Knodel 2014:13; and in Thailand: Mills 1997:41–2, 51). In a small qualitative survey of young adults living in Yangon (and away from their rural families), Ohnmar Aung found that six of her 10 female respondents were the main bread winners in their role as daughters, while none of the sons were (2005:48–9). Chit Ko Ko also found that some expectant first-time mothers hoped to have a girl, because a girl was more responsible and would look after her parents financially, emotionally and physically when they were elderly (2007:118). Young men may be relieved of this responsibility to some extent because, by virtue of their novitiation<sup>85</sup> to their parents for raising them by looking after them in their old age. This debt is greater than a child can ever hope to repay and therefore children “should do everything they can to show their gratitude and please and support their parents” (Noack 2011:189). In a well-known *jataka*, the Brahmin farmer is angry that the parrot king always takes so much seed. Finally, the farmer asks him why, and the parrot king explains that he needs so much seed because he must pay his debt to his parents, as well as granting a loan to his children (Khin Myo Chit 2014:80–82). Similarly, the five duties of children to their parents are laid out in the book, *The Teachings of the Buddha*, and include not only providing “them with all the requisites in life” in their old age, but also that:

“(3) they (children) must maintain their parents’ properties, their parents’ religious duties, and try to straighten their parents’ religious view if they have a wrong view. They must also maintain the good name of their parents and their lineage.

(4) they must obey their parents and make themselves worthy of the parents heritage” (Ministry of Information 2007:251).

These are not mere words, but fundamental societal discourses. A nationwide survey found that 93 percent of retired/elderly parents received financial support from their children (Knodel 2014:13). Repaying one’s debt is also a practical necessity for the majority of parents in a country without a welfare state. In fulfilling the role expected of a child, Chan Chan stated that her most important goal was to be able to look after and provide for her parents until their death. Like her other mundane projects, this is also crucial in accruing good merit for a better rebirth.

*I have to. I have to take this responsibility. That’s why I have to take care of (my parents). I have to fulfil their needs and wants. This is my duty.*

Chan Chan had been actively taking care of her parents since she was 17 years old, even “telling” her father to retire when he reached 60. In her second year of university, she started working full-time to support her family. As the oldest child<sup>86</sup>, they had already

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<sup>84</sup> This concept is encased in the word pali *kataññuta* or gratitude: “The word *kataññuta* consists of two parts: *kata* means that which has been especially done to one or to oneself; and *aññuta* means knowing or recognizing what has been done to one for one’s benefit” (Lay Nwe 2011:85).

<sup>85</sup> The psychotherapist suggested that this concept of duty was probably made stronger through Chan Chan’s experiences in life as a child; that she learned she should care for her brother as the oldest child, especially during the early years of life. Chan Chan said that her brother has always been, and still is, highly dependent on her (Personal communication: Psychodynamic and Gestalt psychotherapist 2015).

<sup>86</sup> The female equivalent of a boy’s novitiation (*shinbyu*) is an ear-piercing ceremony, though this is not considered a major source of merit for parents. According to Jordt, novitiation has been superseded as the greatest possible source of merit, at least for women in the mass lay meditation movement, through the potential to make the first steps toward enlightenment during this life time (2005:59-60).

repaid a major part of their debt to their parents – and particularly their mother – by providing them with what is generally considered the greatest merit possible for a woman (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:19; Jordt 2005:60).

#### 8.1.1 Men: The freedom to be irresponsible

***“A daughter in the family is the best slave.” Myanmar Proverb***  
(Khin Myo Chit 1995:189)

As I have shown above, while sons are also expected to provide some degree of financial support to their parents, they do not face the same expectations to perform “appropriately” which women do, either from their parents, or outside the home. For Chan Chan, the pressure to look after her parents is intensified because her brother, like men in general, were much “freer” than daughters. This “freedom” related to her movements in particular. Whereas her brother was able to go out in the evenings, her parents kept constant tabs on her movements and did not allow her to venture out without a chaperone. These controls over women fit in with ideals of appropriate femininity and the threat of women’s apparent potent sexuality and unquenchable lust. Indeed, over half the young women in Ohnmar Aung’s study felt they were considered inappropriate women by their neighbours, while none of the men did<sup>87</sup> (2005:51). In other words, not only were the conceptions of what it meant to be socially appropriate significantly more restrictive for unmarried women<sup>88</sup>, the need to protect their reputation from the threat of social ostracization or shame was far greater for women than men, especially as their performance also reflected on their parents own ethical values.

*My parents is my first priority. But, most of the children, especially boy, like my younger brother (laughing), and the other brother (brothers generally), they don’t know that they should take care of their parents. They don’t know, or they don’t want to know. I don’t understand them. Because their life is so freedom...They don’t care what they should do, or if they should do like that, their parents will worry about them. They never think like that.*

While a man’s *hpoun* is to be protected and revered, Chan Chan’s statement reiterates apparently common discourses amongst women about men as selfish, childish and incapable (e.g. Spiro 1993a:323; Muller 1994:613)<sup>89</sup>. Indeed, Chan Chan and her mother appeared disappointed with the apparent failure of the men in their family. Such discourses are often used by women to legitimise claims to superordinate positions inside the home (e.g. Spiro 1993a:323; Muller 1994:613). While differentiating themselves from men in this way may enable women like Chan Chan and her mother to legitimate their claims to power,

<sup>87</sup> In my time in Yangon and outside of it, I often heard about so-called “Yangon boys”. One evening I sat with a group of wealthy local men (who demonstrated this by drinking Johnny Walker rather than local whiskey) in their mid-20s. Each boasted of having multiple “girlfriends” simultaneously. Other women were also sitting with us. It seems unimaginable to think of a Myanmar woman talking in a similar vein, especially in mixed company (Field notes 2014).

<sup>88</sup> According to Noack, even young married women have a much greater freedom of movement (2011:190). However, a local man told me that a lot of Burmese men are very jealous and anxious about their wives having contact with other men. As such, they try to limit the movements of their wives (Field notes 2014). This fits in with conceptions of women being the “possession” of their husbands (Noack 2011:119), though generally husbands appear to be able to exert less power over their wives than parents can over a daughter.

<sup>89</sup> Chan Chan and her mother appeared to express great disappointment with the men in their family. While she said she could be proud of her father for his “honesty”, his refusal to exploit his well-ranked government position had meant he had not sufficiently provided for their family. Her brother was “naughty” and failed to perform his duties as a brother and child.

in subordinating men and emphasizing their incompetence and childishness, these women also help alleviate the respective duties of husbands, sons and brothers. For Chan Chan, as a daughter and a socially appropriate woman, meeting the expectations of her is crucial to her production of herself, merit making, and her acceptance within her family and in her 'community'. While Chan Chan emphasizes that performing her duty to her parents is her own decision, she has nevertheless fostered her parents (and indirectly her brothers) dependence on her through her "leadership", her ability to provide financial and emotional support. Furthermore, in contrast to women like Chan Chan, young men like her brother are granted more social "freedoms", need not fear same level of shame and ostracization, and face lower expectations from their parents. While her parents are largely dependent on her, in drawing on these gendered discourses, they are powerful, are able to exert great pressure on her to perform her duty as a daughter. In contrast, in their relationship with her brother, their level of power is significantly lower.

### 8.1.2 The mother–daughter bond

Like her, two of Chan Chan's best friends are also professional women in their mid–30s who lived at home and supported their parents. And like her, their parents did not want them to marry<sup>90</sup>. Chan Chan believed that her parents did not want her to get married because they are highly dependent on her. One important factor in her parents<sup>91</sup> overbearing dependence on and treatment of her is their age, and their subsequent "traditionalism". Both were in their 30s when Chan Chan was born.

*In their minds, in their eyes, we are still very young, they always worry about this. They would like to take care of us. We told them, no need to worry about (us) like that. But they can't.*

However, the greatest challenge for Chan Chan is her mother's<sup>92</sup> emotional dependence on her, which has increased markedly since her illness<sup>93</sup>.

*My mum and me sleep together because during her sleeping, sometime, she feel something, not good thing. So, at that time, I have to wake her up suddenly: 'Ma, Ma, what happened, what happened', like that (laughing nervously). So, I sleep with her together...*

*So, when I arrive at home, at that time, she always told me, the whole day*

<sup>90</sup> In his study of marriage trends amongst women in Southeast Asia, Jones found that urban, educated, professional women like Chan Chan were delaying marriage, or not marrying at all (2009:12-24). Expectations of financial support from their parents is not listed as an important factor in not marrying, though Chan Chan and her two friends situations certainly suggest this may be a common factor.

<sup>91</sup> While Chan Chan said that her father loved her very much, he did not demand emotional support or put emotional pressure on her in the same way her mother did.

<sup>92</sup> When she was a child, Chan Chan's primary caregiver was not her mother or father, but an unmarried aunt. Her aunt said that Chan Chan was the re-birth of her younger sister who had passed away, and with whom Chan Chan shared an uncanny number of character traits. Her aunt looked after Chan Chan and her brother in Yangon when her parents were forced to move elsewhere for work after the regime closed down the department they worked for in the wake of 1988. They returned to the city in 1993 when her father was offered a job when a different government department was opened. Chan Chan's aunt lives nearby today, and they continue to have a close relationship.

<sup>93</sup> Chan Chan attributed the changes in her mother's behaviour to the blood transfusions she required when she was in hospital. It appeared that someone else entered her mother's body through the blood. In one conception of something like a soul, Spiro was told that "the soul (nama) refers to a consciousness or understanding which is carried by a disklike element in the blood. (Hence, the blood, too, is called nama)" (1982:88). I was also told that many people believe the blood had different colours depending on one's virtuousness, or lack thereof (Field Notes 2014).

*what happened (laughing). So, I have to listen, ah, ah (feigning interest, laughing). She is that kind of person (laughing). Very easy to anger, very short temper. And she depend on me entirely.*

So how can I escape from them (laughing). It's a big problem.

Her mother's dependence on her fits with conceptions about the emotional bond between women, in particular between the oldest daughter and the mother (cf. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:114–5). More generally, Mi Mi Khaing emphasized that womanly bonds are particularly important prior to marriage (1984:114–5), as can be seen in Chan Chan's tight relationship with her best friend. However, these bonds remain strong throughout life (1984:114–5)<sup>94</sup>. Indeed, Spiro argued that emotional bonds between women typically supersede those between husband and wife (1977:284)<sup>95</sup>. From what Chan Chan told me, this appears to be the case in her family.

Later on the day of this interview, Chan Chan was going to Mandalay to visit her cousins over the long weekend. She told me she was also hoping to meet a man at a pagoda, but this was blocked by her mother's decision to come along.

*I told my mum, you don't need to worry, because I am not children. Now I am over 30, I can control myself. I can go there alone. But, she told me, she worry about me a lot. She can't leave me alone there. Oh (sighing laugh), I don't like (laughing), she always like that.*

Rather than any apparent attempts at control exercised by her father, it was her mother's attempts to exert control over and emotional dependence on her which Chan Chan found most difficult. Similarly, Chaw Chaw found that many young women living away from their families complained that visits from their parents, and particularly from their mother, were attempts to exercise emotional and social control over them, as well as to collect money from them (2003:218–9). Indeed, social education of and control over unmarried women – particularly their ability to meet with men – is generally the domain of the mother<sup>96</sup>.

“Since they became puberty, women were guided by their mothers how to behave within the family and in the public sphere. This is perceived as a duty of a mother to teach dos and don'ts to her daughter in order to be a good girl in the community” (Chit Ko Ko 2007:119).

That is to say, as with the apparent widespread acceptance of male *hpoun* by women as well as men, it is important to understand that women as subjects are vital in upholding, reproducing and drawing on gendered and hierarchical discourses to exercise power over and to shame other women, both inside and outside the home.

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<sup>94</sup> Mi Mi Khaing suggested, in a frustratingly indirect manner, that lesbian practices between unmarried women are not uncommon, but these desist after marriage (1984:114–5).

<sup>95</sup> In his study of attitudes to pregnancy, Chit Ko Ko was barred by women from entering the delivery room because these things were “women's business”. This was legitimated on the grounds that “traditionally”, childbirth was “a shameful occasion and it could even decline the power of a man (hpoun)” (2007:127: brackets in original).

<sup>96</sup> The similarity between these findings and the relationships between parents and daughters in the Philippines are striking. Lauser was often told by my interview partners something along the lines of: “With daughters it is easier to insist. The relationship between mother and daughter is very close: a daughter is easier to steer in the right direction, she is more responsible than a son. In contrast, when a son has decided upon something, it's more difficult to change his mind and to decide for him.” (2004:200, my translation from the original German).

### 8.1.3 “My parents don’t want me to get married”

Chan Chan’s parents’ financial, emotional and practical dependence on her, as well as apparent protective desires, provide them powerful motivations to maintain their “possession” of her (cf. Noack 2011:119) by inhibiting her from marrying<sup>97</sup>. Marriage would mean moving out of her parental home, and shifting her orientation toward her husband and the expected children (cf. Spiro 1977:149–50; Jones 2009:13). Inside the “contest” which is the “serious game”, Chan Chan’s parents ascribed her the role of the dutiful daughter – the role she ascribed herself as her first priority. Further, they drew on her understanding of herself as a “leader”, but in an attempt to undermine rather than enable her project of marriage.

*My parents don’t want me to get married...Because they worry about me, and also, they think, if you cannot meet a good and intelligent man, you shouldn’t get married with him, because you don’t need to depend on him. You can manage yourself, you can control yourself, you can lead yourself. That’s why you don’t need to get married, they told me like that (laughing ironically).*

Her parents’ argument was in part effective because it reinforces Chan Chan’s own production of herself and therefore makes sense to her. The argument operates on naturalized conceptions of male superiority, and the deference a wife should pay to a husband. That is, as a “leader” herself, Chan Chan did not to be subordinate, and therefore did not need a husband. This argument entails a fundamental paradox, for in order to perform “leadership” in her parent’s eyes, Chan Chan should submit to their power/will. Chan Chan’s parents’ attempts to impede her from marrying created a serious dilemma for her and were the cause of great anxiety.

*Sometime, I was too stressed... For my parents, they are so greedy (laughing), I think. Because they want to keep us. Ah, til when? It’s not good, right.*

Chan Chan’s perception of her parents as “greedy” can be seen primarily in placing their own project before her own interests. While Chan Chan’s fulfilment of her duty of her own accord had won her parents’ “love”, they nevertheless attempted to deny her the agentive space to perform her duties on her own terms. Rather, her “inhabitation” of the norm (Mahmood 2005) had been used by her parents as both the means and the grounds to demand her continued support of, and obedience to, them. Secondly, in her understanding, her parents’ argument is based on an expectation of Chan Chan to inhabit ethical norms, which she does, but which they themselves fail to uphold as parents. She sees their argument as an attempt through unethical means to pressure her to act ethically toward them. As such, Chan Chan said: “I think it’s not fair, right”.

Not only do her parents call on Chan Chan’s duty to support them, they also call on her duty of obedience to them. In doing so, they effectively polarize Chan Chan’s two socially appropriate projects: to be a dutiful daughter, and to be a woman. For in casting the idea of leaving the home as disobedient to them, they are casting marriage itself as a form of disobedience, as a failure to perform the dutiful daughter both they, and Chan Chan herself, ascribe her. As such, this is an attempt to make marriage socially inappropriate and unethical. In other words, her parents’ attempts to stop her marrying are particularly challenging because, whatever she chooses to do, she becomes a failure to herself. Her parents’ argument is an attempt to create an irreconcilable clash of the two norms, something Chan Chan finds so difficult for two related reasons. Firstly, in adopting a

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<sup>97</sup> Noack: “As Myanmar research participants have explained to me, on the day of the wedding reception, a woman changes from their father’s possession into that of their husband.” (2011:119)

dichotomous system of Burmese-Buddhist ethics, Chan Chan tends to make simple clear-cut division between right and wrong, moral and immoral. Secondly, in polarizing her projects, their arguments effectively make Chan Chan's understanding of herself as, and her desire to be a socially appropriate woman, impossible.

Moreover, her parents calling attention to their hierarchical position appears to have been perceived by Chan Chan as a lack of respect for who she was. It demonstrated that despite her determined efforts, in practice, she did not possess the power she claimed for herself. Inside her relationship to them, she was not judged on what she did, but remained fixed in the "traditional" role of who she is and must be, the dutiful daughter.

Furthermore, her parents' arguments appear to have been experienced by Chan Chan as an attack on her fundamental 'self', in several ways. Calling attention to one's power/authority is a breach of the value of *ana* (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing, 22; Fink 2001:120). As such, it is generally understood as a particularly offensive and inappropriate abuse of hierarchy, of inappropriate leadership (McPherson 2015), a form of condescension and a devaluing of a subordinate's "face" (cf. Noack 2011:204). As I have argued above, this "face" is understood by Burmese-Buddhists like Chan Chan not only as the surface of who one is, but part of one's true 'self'. Indeed, Chan Chan told me about a number of different instances in which she had filled with anger and sadness, and was unable to release her "mind" because her willing performance of duty and responsibility had not been recognised by others. Secondly, their arguments undermine her desired self, that of becoming a "woman" through marriage and motherhood.

Nevertheless, she is not exhausted of agency. Rather, she is able to draw on other meaningful Burmese-Buddhist discourses in the pursuit of her project of marriage. These negotiations are the focus of the following sub-chapter (8.2).

#### *8.1.4 A caveat on intention*

From an analytical perspective, it is important to avoid the (all too easy) assumption that actors operating within serious games are involved in the cynical manipulation of "regimes of truth" to pursue their own projects. In adopting her approach, I agree with Ortner's assumption that the subject's intentionality is at the "heart of what agency means" (2006:134; 1996:9-12). Such intention may be conscious, but it need not be. That is, a subject's apparent intentions do not necessitate the assumption of a continuously rational, plotting or self-reflexive subject.

"Thus intentionality in agency might include highly conscious plots and plans and schemes; somewhat more nebulous aims, goals, and ideals; and finally desires, wants, and needs that may range from being buried to quite consciously felt. In short, intentionality as a concept is meant to include all the ways in which action is cognitively and emotionally pointed *toward* some purpose" (Ortner 2006:134).

While it may be possible to read her parents arguments as the cynical manipulation of societal discourses to their own ends, such a suggestion overemphasizes conscious intention on their behalf. Indeed, Chan Chan herself closes out the possibility of cynical manipulation by interpreting her parents desire to "keep" her not only as "greedy", but also as a sign of their "love" for her. In her interviews with unmarried women living away from their parents, Chaw Chaw made a similar point. In one example, a young woman was upset because she interpreted her mother's regular visits as demands for money. Her mother, however, said they were out of love for her daughter, and that her daughter would first understand when she had children of her own (2003:219). Furthermore, while Chan Chan said her father was not as emotionally demanding as her mother, she said that it would be particularly difficult for him to let go of her: "I heard several times in my surrounding. Every father cries and feels sad as soon as his daughter will get marriage."

A serious games approach does not, and cannot, afford an understanding of the psyche, of the underlying reasons for a subject's apparent intentions. Rather, the approach allows us to interpret how differently empowered actors discuss, negotiate, argue, interpret and reinterpret regimes of truth to pursue their own projects<sup>98</sup>. Moreover, it is important to remember that this chapter does not focus on 'facts' per se, but on Chan Chan's understanding and interpretation of the contests with her parents. Furthermore, her articulated experiences are then *interpreted* by me. While I interpret their arguments as attempts to exert power over Chan Chan by both drawing on and ultimately undermining her production of herself as an agent, both Chan Chan and they would interpret their relationship through fundamentally different prisms, and therefore have fundamentally different perspectives (cf. Hage 2009).

## 8.2 Becoming a woman

***"An unmarried woman is not honoured, even if she has 10 brothers."***  
*Myanmar Proverb (Meiji Soe 2014:101)*

As I have briefly alluded to in the previous section, in attempting to inhibit Chan Chan from marrying, her parents were nevertheless acting from a precarious subjective position (cf. Chaw Chaw 2003:221). According to The Teachings of the Buddha and several other texts (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:19; Spiro 1977:153) it is the parents' duty to give their children "in marriage to suitable persons" at an appropriate age (Ministry of Information 2007:252). As such, even in a subordinate role, Chan Chan did not need to submit to nor resist her parents' power "in any simple sense" (Ortner 1999:158) to pursue her marriage project. Rather, she drew on other discourses within the same "regime of truth" from which both her parents and herself were operating. These "different conceptualizations of the norm" (Mahmood 2005:24) enabled her to negotiate restrictive discourses yet avoid rebellion against her parents<sup>99</sup>, something which both her production of herself as a dutiful daughter as well as societal discourses would preclude (Noack 2011:199). In her search for a potential husband, however, Chan Chan's production of herself as "active" and a "leader" would once again be undermined, this time by other discourses about unmarried women.

### 8.2.1 The importance of marriage

Chan Chan's parents' desperation to "keep" her was intense because her desire to marry was a socially and emotionally desirable goal. As a woman in her mid-30s, she was getting "old" socially, and perhaps biologically, to marry and have children. Her parents also knew that Chan Chan believed "now is my time to get married". Not only that, she was also the next in a sort of family queue. Her older cousins had all married, and her younger cousins were waiting to marry, but could not before Chan Chan had<sup>100</sup>.

Further, Chan Chan viewed marriage as essential to becoming an adult and no longer a child directly subordinate to her parents. Staying at home had allowed her parents' dependence on her to develop, as well as allowing them to maintain an image of her as a child. As such, like many single women, marriage offered Chan Chan the most socially

<sup>98</sup> Even if one has the power to push through projects, the intention need not match the outcome. Indeed, frequently it does not (Ortner 2006:134-5).

<sup>99</sup> According to Noack, "open 'rebellion' is culturally precluded and religiously prohibited" (2011:199). While this argument is an over-generalization, it reiterates the social pressure to conform to norms.

<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately I cannot say if this is a common idea, or simply something unique to Chan Chan's family. In any case, it may have been a strategy being used by Chan Chan's uncles and aunts to put pressure on her parents to allow her to marry.

appropriate and personally desirable option to be freed from her parents' dependence and controls (Chaw Chaw 2003:220–1; Spiro 1997:149–50)<sup>101</sup>.

Moreover, Chan Chan viewed marriage as essential to an emotionally satisfying life<sup>102</sup> particularly after her parents had “passed away”.

*Sometime, when I was alone, and I am thinking about something, I feel very lonely. At that time, I need, I need partner, I think.*

*But, most of (my) time, I always invest in my family. So, I have to do a lot of stuff, and to take a lot of responsibility, and I never think about it. So (laughing), sometime I think (about it), not every time (laughing). How, I don't know (laughing).*

Once her parents had died, Chan Chan would cease to be the dutiful daughter and rather become a ‘spinster’, a role which appeared to cause her great anxiety, as “a woman should not be alone”. As such, she attached great social status to marriage. Indeed, the importance of marriage in becoming a woman can be seen in the local terms, with a woman’s status changing overnight from an “apyou” (“youthful version”) to an “a-ou” (“old one”) (Noack 2011:119).

In marrying, Chan Chan expected to become a mother. In doing so, socially she would become a ‘woman’ and a worthwhile wife (Jones 2009:22; Larlee 2015; Mi Mi Khaing 1984:17), an understanding I believe Chan Chan would endorse. Indeed, marriage and motherhood are so intertwined that childless couples often faced stigmatization and even ostracization<sup>103</sup> (Myint Moh Soe 2008:1ff). As noted above, as the novitiation (*shinbyu*) of a son is widely understood as the most meritorious act a woman can perform in her life, this goal also becomes supremely important for a better rebirth (Khin Myo Chit 1995:19; Jordt 2007:60). Further, in moving out from her parents’ home and away from their control, I believe that Chan Chan saw marriage as an opportunity to become more like the “leader” she understood herself to be, by allowing her to take on a more powerful role as wife, and eventually mother, in her new home (cf. Spiro 1997:149–50).

### 8.2.2 Active-passivity in the search for a husband

When I asked Chan Chan if she was doing anything to find a husband, her answer was definitive and forceful: “No!”. The idea that Chan Chan – who insisted she was “active” in pursuit of her projects – was doing nothing to achieve possibly her most profoundly life-changing goal struck me as incongruent. However, Chan Chan was restricted by discourses which portrayed actively looking for a husband as unfeminine, inappropriate, immodest, lacking in shyness and sexual innocence. Again, the performance of appropriate femininity was especially important because it would not be understood by Chan Chan and others as merely for show, but rather as her ‘true’ character, a passive and appropriate woman. As such, through the performance of appropriate femininity, Chan Chan would be seen as

<sup>101</sup> A second possible path is becoming a *thilashin* (nun), though that this is likely not as socially desirable as getting married/becoming a mother.

<sup>102</sup> Discussions about sexuality and sexual practices from women’s perspectives is limited in works about Myanmar women, almost certainly due to difficulties getting access to information and/or the writers’ own performance of appropriate femininity (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984; Khin Myo Chit 1995; Spiro 1997, 1993b). This work is no exception. Spiro argued that marriage was particularly desirable for women because it means the transition from an asexual to a sexual role, though this appears to be an assumption rather than based in actual interview data (1977, 149). However, some studies looking at attitudes toward sex, contraception and sex work and the spread of HIV/Aids do exist (e.g. Ohnmar Aung 2005; Keller 2014).

<sup>103</sup> Not only were women stigmatized, married men without children often faced ridicule from their peers for failing to be a ‘man’. This, in turn, often led to pressure on women from their husbands (Myint Moh Soe 2008:69-70).

indeed appropriate. In this understanding, therefore, actively pursuing a man would have likely been counter-productive, rendering not only her behaviour, but indeed her very 'self' unfeminine and inappropriate, and therefore making her undesirable and unsuitable as a potential wife. To be sure, Chan Chan's "stress" or frustration was exacerbated not only by her parent's perceived misuse of hierarchy/power to inhibit her search for a man, but also by societal discourses which further undermined her conception of herself as an "active" woman.

The importance of performing passivity, however, should not be understood as completely closing out Chan Chan's agentive space. Inside restrictive discursive frames, subjects can develop more or less effective strategies to pursue their projects. Employing a serious games approach, we can see how Chan Chan employed a general strategy of active-passivity. That is, she simultaneously performed, and thereby was, the ideal feminine while actively seeking to be found by a potential husband.

How did she do this? Given her parents' apparent failure to perform their duties in facilitating marriage for their daughter, Chan Chan was most reliant on her uncles, aunts and cousins, who actively searched for a potential husband for her. Indeed, her younger cousins were particularly eager for her to meet a man, so that they themselves could marry. While Chan Chan did not make explicit that she encouraged these efforts, it was clear that she was certainly hopeful that they would be successful, despite on one occasion saying that her family should not worry about her. Given her closeness to her aunts and uncles, her "open" and "honest" nature, and her skill as a player of serious games, I am convinced that within the bounds of appropriate role performance, she was highly active in recruiting her wider family's assistance.

Chan Chan also pursued a number of other active-passive strategies to be 'found' by a man, including attending political events, going to pagodas, and using facebook as a space to present herself to possible partners. Indeed, Chan Chan's facebook wall is a powerful demonstration of her active-passive approach, especially as facebook is used as a sort of modern dating service in Yangon, and a way in which men had made contact with her in the past. Like a number of other women in Yangon, Phnom Penh (Personal communication: Christensen 2015) and Jakarta (Personal communication: Schneider 2015) and quite possibly throughout Southeast Asia, facebook offered Chan Chan the possibility to produce herself as a desirable, single woman. That is, a 'good', "clever", intelligent, "modern", attractive and well-presented woman visiting pagodas, with important people in professional environments and at famous sites around the country. As with the Filipino women in Lauser's study (2004, 176-9), such active-passivity allowed Chan Chan to present herself as willing to be subordinate to her senior family members, and yet at the same time reluctant, uninterested, even unwilling to meet a man, all the while retaining a highly active role in finding one.

### *8.2.3 Desperate means to retain agency*

In perceiving herself as forced to resort to an active-passivity, or in her subordinate role in relation to her parents, Chan Chan was painfully aware that her production of herself as a "leader" and an "active" woman – an agent – was profoundly overstated. Unable to search for a husband in accordance with her "active manner", and frustrated by the lack of results active-passivity had delivered as a strategy, Chan Chan turned to desperate means to achieve her goal.

Her desperation was exacerbated by her seeming disappointment that a sort of Burmese-Buddhist fairy tale<sup>104</sup> had not come true for her. When she was younger, it appears

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<sup>104</sup> Chan Chan told me the story of a young man who saw a woman at a pagoda and fell instantly in love with her. This was due to linkage in their past lives. This story, however, had the hallmarks of a fairy tale, leading me to think that it was a sort of modern, urban adaptation.

Chan Chan had hoped that she had linkage with a man from a past life, and that when they would meet, the man would fall in love with her instantly. But this had not come to pass, and she had become convinced that she would not meet a man that way.

In her desperation, Chan Chan had turned to an astrologer. This was an act of desperation because, as a “modern”, middle-class Burmese Buddhist, Chan Chan clearly and repeatedly rejected astrology and other such practices as backward, non-scientific and non-Buddhist (cf. Noack 2011:210).

*Chan Chan: (laughing nervously) The astrologer telled me, you are sure, you will not be the single one (laughing).*

*Matt: (laughing)*

*Chan Chan: This is true. I told the astrologer, when can I get married? (The astrologer said) You will meet (someone) very soon (laughing), I don't know when.*

*Matt: (laughing) When did you go to the astrologer?*

*Chan Chan: Oh (laughing, sighs). I think three months ago, or (laughing).*

*Matt: Can you tell me about the astrologer, about what happened there?*

*Chan Chan: (laughing nervously) Sometime ah, (there is) a lot of stress in my mind, at that time: that is only the excuse to ask him to release our stress. At that time, we go to astrologer, and ask them for our future, also the palmist. But ah, when I go to the astrologer, every time, they told me, you are sure, you will not be the single one, you will get married.*

The astrologer's prediction appeared to be a mantra of a hope, a mantra she repeated to convince herself that despite her lack of agency in finding a man, she would achieve her goal.

*I don't need to look, someone, my aunty, uncle, they will help me, or they will look for (me). I don't know, not sure. But, if I'm sure I will not be a single, a man will be, will appear (laughing). It's sure (laughing). Just to wait (laughing), just to be patient. Oh (sighing laugh), just to be patient, ya (laughing).*

Chan Chan's constant laughter, sighing, and apparent desire to change the topic, while continuing to talk about meeting a man, demonstrated her nervousness about the truth of the astrologer's prediction and her feeling of powerlessness. Indeed, the desperation in Chan Chan's voice and “manner” at this stage of the interview was palpable. It was at this time which I felt the most sympathy for her and her clear frustration at the weakness of her position, especially in contrast to my own agentive space as a white, Western man. Further, in line with feminine shyness, sharing this information with me, a man, and the potential inappropriateness of this act, likely contributed to Chan Chan's nervousness.

Similarly, on a visit to a pagoda near Sagaing, Chan Chan and her mother gathered the sand which is supposed to make all “trouble disappear”. However, Chan Chan said that while they had done that, it would not be effective in returning her mother to health.

I believe this demonstrates a fundamental element of Chan Chan's way of doing life. In order to maintain an understanding of herself as an agent, she engages in various and sometimes ad-hoc strategies to negotiate a web of paradoxical discourses, thereby trying to maintain some perception of power and control. Generally, she finds her strategies and practices “meaningful” and therefore effective, as they are based in fundamental “truths”

of the world. However, when she is no longer able to see any way of negotiating these structures to pursue her goals, she understands her agency to be totally exhausted. In her apparent desperation to maintain a sense of agency, she then turns to strategies which lack meaning to her, and attempts to give them meaning – to imbue them with “authority and truth” – through her practice. This may be effective to a limited degree. At the very least, in doing so, she hopes to clear her mind, to assure herself that she has done everything possible within her “active” power to achieve her goal.

### 8.3 Paradoxical imaginations of herself as a wife

*“The son is the master, the husband is god.” Myanmar expression  
(Min Zin 2001)*

In the previous sections, I have illustrated how Chan Chan’s production of herself as an agent was fundamentally undermined within serious games by the pressure to perform appropriate gendered, relational roles. The dissonance between her imagination of herself and her ability to do life caused her great “stress”, frustration and desperation. Through her emphasis on agency, she had sought to overcome the structures which confined her as a woman. And yet, in imagining herself with a man, Chan Chan herself emphasized exactly the opposite, the importance of a Burmese-Buddhist feminine ideal, and the subordination to a man it entailed. While Chan Chan first mentioned marriage in the interview (probably partially out of the need to be “honest” but also because she wanted to talk about it), this section was punctuated by significantly more pauses and nervous/embarrassed laughter than others. It also required me to (gently) prod her for answers than was otherwise the case.

*Chan Chan: I will need (a man) in my future, for that (for when her parents pass away). If I meet with some good man who can lead my life, it’s very important. If I meet one man but he cannot lead my life or he cannot lead me, I don’t want it (him). Because I don’t need the follower, I need the leader, I’m already leader, right (laughing).*

*Matt: Ya. So, he, how can he lead, do you mean, he can...?*

*Chan Chan: Everything.*

*Matt: He can provide money, what, what is every-?*

*Chan Chan: Everything. Everything.*

*Matt: What is everything mean?*

*Chan Chan: (laughing) Everything.*

*Matt: Like...?*

*Chan Chan: He can, he can advice. This is wrong or right, so, in everything he, he have (to be) more intelligent than me. I need that, that man.*

*(laughing) But I think it’s very difficult (laughing). Because, most of men are not perfect one, right. (laughing). For me only, I also not perfect one, right. I still need to do a lot of things.*

*Matt: How do you think that would work with you? Because you are very much like a leader, you say you are, and I think you are. How do you think that would work, because you like to be in control, I see this.*

*Chan Chan: Ya, ya.*

*Matt: How can you be with a man who wants to be in control too?*

*Chan Chan: Matt! (nervous laughter).*

This excerpt poses several important questions which are crucial to understanding Chan Chan's conception of her 'self' and her agency. Why would Chan Chan desire to be subordinate to a man, when her entire production of herself has focused on her right to take on power-filled, superordinate relational roles? How can she desire to be in a subordinate position, especially as she so often found subordinate roles to be frustrating, even hurtful? Why, when she apparently sought to escape the domination of her parents, did she seek to replace them with a dominant husband? And, why did she seek a relationship with a man in which the very possibility of being who she understands herself to be would not be possible?

Chan Chan's apparent desire to be subordinate to a man requires a brief recap on naturalised gender differences, and in particular the concept of *hpoun*. While a woman cannot possess *hpoun*, a man does. *Hpoun* reflects not only a man's spiritual superiority, but also his "worldly authority, influence and power" (Noack 2014:96). In this context, wives show both private and public deference to their husband's superiority (Spiro 1977:275–6), with the husband/father commonly referred to as "Eain Oo Nat" or "spiritual head of the household" (Chaw Chaw 2003:211). This superiority is widely accepted or "even embraced" by men and women alike (e.g. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:21–3; Aye Nwe 2009:131ff; Min Zin 2001). As such, "(s)ince males are "nobler" than females, it is only proper that they should have authority over them" (Spiro 1993a:318). This attitude is apparently "ingrained" in women through a wide variety of practices within the home and in public aimed at protecting and enhancing a man's *hpoun* (e.g. Noack 2014:96–7; Spiro 1977:275–6). Mi Mi Khaing argued that "(s)ex distinction operating on the principle of regard for male *hpon* (*hpoun*) is present in all relationships" (1984:21). While Chan Chan clearly did not believe that all men were superior to all women, she certainly seemed to believe that they should be. In this context, it is fair to assume that Chan Chan's romantic imagination of married life entailed a common conception of herself as a wife subordinate to a rightful, just, strong and spiritually superior "leader". The belief in the submission to such a rightful "leader" appears to be present not just at a state level, but all levels within society (eg. Maung Maung Gyi 1983:vi). Inside the home, this means acquiescence to the husband and father (Wells 1.8.15)<sup>105</sup>. At least theoretically, Chan Chan appeared to imagine herself being submissive to such a man.

Chan Chan also viewed subordination as a means to alleviate the overwhelming responsibility and duty she had, and the subsequent "stress" that it brought with it. For her, subordination would open up other realms of "freedom" she desired, "freedom" from the constant pressures of responsibility, and allow her a better opportunity to focus on her career, her education, the children she would like to have. It would also enable her to visit important religious sites around the country. Such a man would also increase her social capital and make her proud to be an *a-ou*, an old one. Moreover, a wealthier man would allow her to have a more comfortable life, to purchase more consumer products and even to buy their own apartment. In contrast, a man who could not provide this security for her was not needed because he too would become a burden on her. She had enough burdens.

<sup>105</sup> CSOs in Myanmar often said that "democracy" required a total change in the hierarchical thinking which dominates Myanmar society, from the highest levels to the home (Wells 1.8.15).

That is, rather than merely reproducing a stereotypical image of marriage, I believe that Chan Chan understood the hierarchical relationship between wife and husband as meaningful and productive. Indeed, as a subject Chan Chan had a number of powerful motivations, embedded in cultural meanings, to find a man who performed masculine superiority. More specifically, meeting such a man would be crucial to invalidating her parents' major arguments against marriage. Firstly, such a man would be a "leader" for her, a "leader" she could follow, because he was in every way superior to her, thereby invalidating her parents' argument that she had no use for a man. Secondly, in having a higher salary than her, another important attribute she listed, such a husband would enable her to continue providing for her parents financially, thereby undermining what could be perceived as their most socially legitimate argument against her marrying, her duty to support them. Invalidating these two major arguments appears to be crucial for Chan Chan. In doing so, she would be able to remain a socially appropriate daughter, and simultaneously become a "woman". No type of husband would be right to counter her parents' other major argument, that marriage was a form of disobedience to them. However, as I have shown above, her parents' were arguing from a discursively weak position. In conducting herself in a socially appropriate manner in the pursuit of a husband, her parents' counterarguments would lack power and meaning, especially as she had rallied and would have the power-filled support of her uncles and aunts. In sum, motivated by romantic notions, naturalised gender differences, and a need to push through her project inside the contest with her parents, Chan Chan embraces – at least ostensibly – the doctrine of the superior man. Perhaps she even believes Mi Mi Khaing's statement that Myanmar women had been able to live satisfactory and full lives, despite being disadvantaged on a number of levels (1984:16).

Until now, I have focused on Chan Chan's motivations for embracing the ostensible norm of a wife's subordination to a husband. However, it is important to attempt to unravel the apparent incongruencies between Burmese-Buddhist gender theories and practice in order to contextualise Chan Chan's statements, and undermine any simple notion of desiring a superordinate husband. Despite it being a woman's duty to preserve and enhance her husband's *hpoun*, and to perform the "traditional" role within the home even if they are also working outside of it (Myo Thwin 2007:144), a number of authors have argued that, in practice, husband and wife tend to be engaged in a contextually shifting hierarchical relationship. Among others, Spiro argued that wives often subtly yet profoundly take the superordinate role in the home (1997:19).

"In addition to controlling the purse strings, the wife is also the controlling influence in many other aspects of the husband's behaviour including the type of clothing he wears, the kind of food he eats, the friends he brings home, where and how often he spends his time away from home, and the like" (Spiro 1993:323).

Indeed, the main argument for women's equality in Burmese society appears to be based on the power women exercise inside the home <sup>106</sup>(e.g. Muller 1994:613; Spiro 1997:19). Nash was typical of this sentiment: "there is no clear pattern of authority between husband and wife" (1965:253–4). Indeed, Chan Chan – and apparently also her mother's narratives – about the failure of men in their family undercut any outward projection of deference or domination men might claim in the home. Chan Chan's portrayal of her brother and father as failing to fulfil their duties to the family reiterated apparently common discourses which village and professional women alike repeated about men (Spiro 1993a:323; Muller 1994:613). Further, as I demonstrated in the chapter about my relationship with Chan Chan, she demonstrated a fine contextual awareness and assumed the superordinate position as and when appropriateness did not prohibit it. In essence, while Chan Chan may have desired to take up the subordinate role of a wife, and would certainly do so in many situations, her attitudes to men, understanding/production of herself, and ability

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<sup>106</sup> This argument essentially flattens out all forms of power, ignoring the importance of how women have been effectively locked out of political, military, economic and other forms of power outside the home..

to negotiate situationally shifting hierarchies undermine any likelihood that she would be uniformly or truly submissive to a husband.

#### 8.4 Summary

Chan Chan attempts to carve out agentive space by taking up discourses of empowerment, and by producing herself as an ethical woman and a “leader” who “freely” performs the roles expected of her. In analysing how Chan Chan attempts to push through her projects inside the realm of serious games, it becomes clear that her claims of and to power cannot be realised in practice. Despite her determination to shift the focus from what she is (the 10 percent she cannot control) to what she does (the 90 percent), in her roles as a daughter and a single woman, she finds herself ultimately expected to perform naturalised, “traditional” women’s roles (cf. Khin Myo Chit 1995:204). In the relationship with her parents, Chan Chan’s production of herself as a “leader” and successful performance of her role of daughter appear to have been counter-productive. Instead of opening up agentive space for her, her parents have used them as a meaningful and thus powerful argument for her to stay with them. Chan Chan experiences the dissonance between her production of herself, and the limited ability she has to do life in a web of restrictive discourses, as highly frustrating and distressing. Nevertheless, she is a determined and skilful player who constantly strategizes in order to be who she ‘really’ is: an agent, an “active” “leader” always pursuing her goals, because she alone can achieve them. To do this, Chan Chan does not engage in open resistance, but rather conceptualises “the norm” in ways strategic to her projects. Despite her incredible flexibility and ability to negotiate restrictive gendered discourses, even Chan Chan sometimes perceives that her agency is exhausted. In her desperation, she looks for hope by trying to imbue “non-scientific” beliefs with meaning through practice, an exercise that may make her feel a little better, but which she deems ultimately unproductive in achieving her projects. In her apparently inconsistent desire to be with a superior man and abdicate her natural position of “leader”, Chan Chan proclaims her determination to simultaneously perform the roles of socially appropriate woman and daughter, thereby annulling her parents’ arguments against marriage. As she demonstrated in her relationship with me, aware of and able to negotiate the discrepancies between Burmese-Buddhist gender conceptions and practice, Chan Chan would likely attempt to be a “leader”, to assume positions of power within any relationship with a husband, as and when situational protocol did not preclude it.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the roles Chan Chan is expected to perform inside serious games greatly restricts her agentive spaces. In the following chapter, I turn to her pursuit of being the kind of woman she both should be, and the kind of woman she wants to be (cf. Mahmood 2005:30–1).

## 9. THE ETHICAL WOMAN AND “PROXIMATE SALVATION”

In Chan Chan’s understanding, crucial to a better rebirth is not simply making merit, but also ethical performance in all aspects of life. Performing ethically is not disconnected from her merit-making mundane projects, rather it is the very foundation of them, and indeed all her life practices. Chan Chan has a particular “telos”, or model of the type of person she understands that she should be and the type of person she wants to be (Mahmood 2005:30). In order to be the right kind of ethical agent, modern Burmese-Buddhisms offer subjects like Chan Chan a range of “technologies” to develop the ‘self’ toward this “telos” (Mahmood 2005:30; Foucault 1988:17). The most important of these technologies is generally understood to be meditation (e.g. Houtman 1990:14; Jordt 2005:60–2)<sup>107</sup>. Through the use of such technologies, Chan Chan focuses on developing her “mindset” and “manner” in preparation for the final minute of life, the critical moment in determining one’s final cause, and therefore rebirth. This work therefore takes place on an individual level, (largely) outside the realms of serious games. For women like Chan Chan then, work on the ethical self is particularly attractive because it offers them a level of agentive space typically denied them inside the pursuit of mundane world projects<sup>108</sup> (cf. Jordt 2007:157; 2005:62). Moreover, the goal of a better rebirth offers hope that, at least in the next life, they will have a level of spiritual and worldly power denied them in this one.

### 9.1 Ethics, agency and rebirth

The most fundamental element of Chan Chan’s production of the self was the focus on herself as an ethical woman. Ethics was the cornerstone of her claim to “leadership”, and therefore to her right to greater agentive space inside serious games. This is not the complete story. Rather, the achievement and right performance of the woman she should be and wanted to be was central to creating good cause for the next life.

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<sup>107</sup> Lay meditation became particularly important in the 1950s under the democratically-elected Prime Minister, U Nu. He emphasized the importance of a Buddhist way of life and “universal enlightenment” (Jordt 2005:47).

<sup>108</sup> In the realist short stories of Moe Moe (Inya), disappointed by their lives, the female characters “share a common fate – surrender to the demands of the city, the end of an innocent life, finding a refuge in Buddhism” (Tharaphi Than 2014:42). Looking from an agency perspective, the importance of Buddhism can be understood in the power and meaning it offers women in their lives: in being able to become the right kind of woman, in making merit, in working on the ‘self’ to achieve the right “telos”, in creating an identity for the self through differentiation, in the pursuit of a better rebirth etc.

Ascribing to popular Burmese-Buddhist understandings, Chan Chan's goal of salvation is a proximate one. Rather than seeking to attain nirvana, she desires a better rebirth in the next life. That is, rebirth as a man. To achieve a better rebirth, Chan Chan pursues her five earthly merit-making projects as well as practicing other merit-making activities, which include primarily *sila* (following the precepts), *dana* (making religious donations) and meditation. Spiro argued that for most people, merit making was the only important aspect of achieving a better rebirth.

"Action in kammatic Buddhism, on the other hand – i.e. meritorious action – is intended to change one's karma, not one's moral or spiritual character. The desired transformation in material and social status is achieved without any corresponding transformation in the self" (Spiro 1982:105).

Unlike the "kammatic Buddhists"<sup>109</sup> in Spiro's work, Chan Chan embraces a more modern Buddhist ethos, understanding merit making as insufficient in and of itself for a better rebirth. For her, ethical performance is even more important. As she told me during a casual conversation:

*I believe that if you are good person, if you do good things for other people, if you take care that other people are not sad, or worried, or afraid, are rather happy because of you, then you will come back better. Those who do not do good things, but just make donations, just make merit, those who give 10 percent but want 100 percent, they will not get 100 percent. These people will come back as people, but as lesser people (Field notes 2014).<sup>110</sup>*

That is, for Chan Chan and (modern) Burmese-Buddhists like her, her total cause is made up of all her "intentional actions", of all her practices in life, mental or physical (cf. Khin Myo Chit 1995:55). While Chan Chan viewed her insistence on performing ethically as a barrier to success in her life projects, completing these projects ethically was paramount in creating the good cause.

*So, at the present time, they (most people) want to (be) wealthy, they want to get all luxury, so for that, they don't want to (be) honest. They don't want to take care about their new (next) life. Most of the people think like that, Matt.*

Her focus on ethical performance can therefore be understood as two-fold. Firstly, her merit-making projects themselves are only merit-making when achieved through right performance, the right "manner"/"mindset", as Chan Chan referred to it. Despite inequalities in power inside serious games, whether Chan Chan is in a subordinate position or performing the role of "leader", ethical performance is always possible. Indeed, it is essential. Secondly, all actions, all practices, be they mental or physical, must be performed ethically.

Chan Chan has a distinct "telos", a discursively created model of being or behaviour which she seeks to achieve, to perform, in all aspects of her life (Mahmood 2005:30–1). These conceptions are based on *The Way of Death*, which provides a set of guiding principles for the achievement of this telos. These are guides for being and doing in the world. They are central to her way and mode of being, they shape her actions. For Chan

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<sup>109</sup> Spiro argued for a loose typology of Buddhisms in Myanmar. The most popular form of Buddhism was "kammatic Buddhism", that is, focused on generating good karma (pali: kamma) and achieving a better rebirth (1982:66-139).

<sup>110</sup> This is not a direct quote, but was rather written from memory later that day.

Chan, this model means keeping the precepts<sup>111</sup>, as well as key values including honesty, discipline, performance of duty and politeness (which are all aspects of the eight-fold noble path and the ten perfections), as well as adherence to the Buddhist ethical principles she emphasizes most strongly: contentment, sympathy and fairness. These are Chan Chan's translation of the principle virtues, which Walton and Hayward emphasised were so important in Burmese-Buddhist discourses:

“(1) myitta (Pali metta): loving kindness – the desire to offer happiness to others; (2) karuna: compassion – the desire to remove suffering from the other person; (3) mudita: sympathetic joy – deriving joy from the success and happiness of others; and (4) upekkha: equanimity – acceptance of things as they are and restraint from discrimination” (Walton and Hayward 2014:36).

These ethics are “positive” in the Foucauldian sense, in that they are central in forming her understandings of who she should be, and the actions she takes towards this ideal self (Mahmood (2005:27–31). In this thesis then, I apply an understanding akin to

“(…) what Foucault calls ethics: the careful scrutiny one applies to one's daily actions in order to shape oneself in accordance with a particular model of behaviour” (Mahmood 2005:187).

Central to performing ethically is the work Chan Chan performs on herself to achieve this “telos”. This aligns to the Burmese-Buddhist conception of agency I outlined in Chapter 6. To recap, agency is a gift and a responsibility of human life which allows one to be/become a “real Buddhist”: that is, “to study, practice, and realise the Teachings of the Buddha” (Ministry of Information 2007:3).

As the work toward achieving this telos takes place at the level of the ‘self’, societal position is of no significance, nor is the relational hierarchy with others important. This makes it particularly appealing for women like Chan Chan because she sees herself as having a level of agency which her roles preclude in the pursuit of her life world projects. This may explain why middle-class women make up the majority of lay meditation practitioners (Jordt 2007:158), and the retreat into Buddhism is often seen as a method of escape for women from worldly subordination (Tharaphi Than 2014:42). This model is also crucial for women like Chan Chan in carving out their own identities in the world, marking themselves as ethically superior to others, and particularly to those who exert power over them in the mundane world, be it women or men in their lives, or indeed the state (Jordt 2007:139–169). In doing so, as I argued in Chapter 6, Chan Chan produces herself as superior to superordinates who do not behave ethically. Moreover, the potential salvation offered through ethical performance – in conjunction with merit-making – is appealing to women like Chan Chan. I develop this later in the chapter. Before I turn to how Chan Chan performs this work on the ‘self’, it is important to understand how the ‘self’ is conceived of.

## 9.2 The ‘self’, “manner” and “mindset”

While the belief in the ‘self’ is a form of heresy in canonical Buddhisms, it is likely that most Burmese-Buddhists have some conception of a ‘self’ (e.g. Collins 1982:6; Noack 2014:97; Spiro 1982:85). Without this understanding of the ‘self’, Chan Chan's supramundane project would be pointless.

The other important aspect of Chan Chan's understanding of the ‘self’ are the concepts of “manner” and “mindset”. “Manner”, which was Chan Chan's translation of the Myanma

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<sup>111</sup> Not merely for merit but also for disciplining the ‘self’.

phrase *a pyu a mu*<sup>112</sup>, is notoriously difficult to translate. “Manner” is such a broad concept that Chan Chan exhausted of listing its different aspects, though the most important are the principle virtues: sympathy, contentment and fairness. “Manner” is also the first thing you notice about someone. As such, it includes definitively “external” aspects such as one’s way of being, conduct, “behaviour”, ability to relate to others, personality, appearance, and even clothing.

The relationship and distinction between “manner” and “mindset” is complex and not clearly defined, even for Burmese Buddhists. The mind, located anatomically in the heart, is the centre of all action, and the focus of all operations on the ‘self’. Thus, when Chan Chan is “stressed” and feels angry or upset, this shows in her face (her “manner”), but it is in fact because her “mind” is not “clear”. Yet a dichotomy cannot be maintained. At times, Chan Chan referred to “mind”/“manner” as the same thing and used them interchangeably, sometimes as “mindset” being a part of “manner”, and at others as separate but inextricably related. In other words, “manner” and “mindset” are so closely linked as to almost dissolve into one another. A division between ‘external’ performance and a fundamental, “Western” “true” ‘inner’ ‘self’ cannot be maintained (Noack 2011:31–2).

Nevertheless, while it is always clear in her “manner” how her mind is, Chan Chan emphasized that a lot people “pretend”, that they are able to control their “mind” (in the heart) with their “brain” (in the head). In doing so, they perform a “manner” which is not their “mindset”. Chan Chan understood controlling one’s “manner” intentionally with the “brain” as a form of “pretending” or dishonesty. She cannot do this<sup>113</sup>: she cannot separate her “mindset” from her “manner”. For Chan Chan then, ethical performance is not merely a performance or reflection of who she is, it is her fundamental ‘self’. In order to be/become her telos, Chan Chan therefore performs operations on her “mind”. For it is maintaining/achieving a clear mind which enables one to be/become ethical: to perform honesty, discipline, contentment, sympathy, fairness and so on.

### 9.3 The last minute

For Burmese Buddhists like Chan Chan, the right “manner” and “mindset” are essential in the last minute of life – for it is the moment of death and one’s final “cause” which will determine one’s rebirth. However, only through a lifetime of preparation for this final minute can Chan Chan ensure she is spiritually prepared for the moment.

*We can die everywhere, every age, I think like that...So, for that, we have to keep this three guide,(and) the mindset: sympathy, not greedy/content, and for everyone fair.*

*We have to keep deeply in our mind, and we have to take this manner. If we do like that, for our future, for our new life, we will get the better life.<sup>114</sup>*

<sup>112</sup> Noack referred to a related concept, “yin gyei.hmu”, which he translated as “cultured, civilized, refined, well-manneredness”, and which was “what many Myanmar people pride themselves on most” (2011:264).

<sup>113</sup> These conceptions are mirrored in Gilbert’s study about how different MSM (men who have sex with men) in Yangon are considered to be either consistent or a disjunctured between “mind/heart” and “manner” (his words). At one end of a spectrum, a total consistency between “mind/heart” and “manner” exists for biological men who are women in their “mind/heart” and perform feminine norms (“manner”). At the other end of the spectrum, biological men who are women in their “mind/heart”, but perform masculine norms are considered disjunctured (2013:254–60).

<sup>114</sup> Note the difference between this modern Buddhist conception and one Spiro argued was typical of “kammatic Buddhism”. In kammatic Buddhist conceptions, as one can die at any time, it is important make as much merit as possible now to ensure the best possible rebirth (1982:111).

At the moment of death, she should simply focus on the Triple Gem – Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – and keep her mind “open”, clean and pure. She needs to be free from all worry and attachment to her family and friends, her job, money, to the materiality of the mundane world, and remember the key virtues. In doing so, her “cause” will be good.

#### 9.4 Technologies of the self

The focus of the work Chan Chan performs on herself is the mind. In striving to keep her mind clear – which enables the right “telos” in daily practice and in preparedness for the moment of death – Chan Chan employs a range of Burmese-Buddhist and everyday life operations on the self. In applying this concept, I am inspired by Mahmood’s adoption of Foucault’s

“...technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state – of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988:17).

In working on keeping her mind “clear”, the technologies Chan Chan uses include reminding herself that those who wronged her will pay their karmic dues, talking to her best friend, over-eating, going shopping or to the cinema, taking a trip, or visiting a pagoda. The fact that these technologies are not simply religious practices but also mundane practices demonstrates that the mind is not simply an abstract Buddhist concept, but also a fundamental “truth” of the world, like the Law of Karma. Nevertheless, in line with hegemonic discourse (e.g. Houtman 1990:14; Jordt 2005:60–2), Chan Chan insisted that meditation was the most effective method of “clearing” the mind and achieving the right “manner”.

Chan Chan identified a number of areas she needs to work on her ‘self’ through meditation. Her “anger”, “disappointment” in others, “negativity” and focus on the failures of others and herself were all ways that she perceives herself as failing to up to her telos. In order to release her mind, last year Chan Chan went on a ten-day retreat to a meditation centre over Tianjin, the water festival to mark Myanmar New Year. I now turn to investigate Chan Chan’s related experiences at the meditation centre, in order to understand how she worked on her ‘self’ and what effects this had.

#### 9.5 Meditation: The ultimate technology

Life at the meditation centre was strict. The daily routine involved rising very early, eating only two small vegetarian meals, slow and controlled movements, five 90-minute meditation sessions and a lecture on the Dharma, and keeping the ten precepts<sup>115</sup>. The main emphasis of practice at vipassana (insight meditation) centres like the one Chan Chan visited is a focus on the body in order to “become detached of the importance of one’s body” (Houtman 1990:17–20)<sup>116</sup>.

*This is not our body: we have to focus like that. The body is not our body,*

<sup>115</sup> The five precepts plus refraining (6) from food after midday, (7) from “dancing, singing, music and unseemly shows”, (8) making oneself beautiful, (9) from relaxing on high and comfortable furniture, (10) from accepting money (Bhikkhu Ariyesako 1998:200).

<sup>116</sup> The main emphasis of vipassana or insight meditation in contemporary Myanmar is in gaining mindfulness of the body, rather than on feeling, mind or “mind-objects” (Houtman 1990:17).

*we have our mind only. We have to divide the mind and body.*

For Chan Chan, attaining such control over the body in order to focus exclusively on the mind was a painful process<sup>117</sup>. But as the days progressed, her concentration improved, and she no longer suffered from hunger, and stopped counting the quarter hourly dongs of the clock during the meditation sessions. Through this disciplining of the self, Chan Chan was able to achieve a fundamental change in her “mindset” and “manner”.

*Our mind during the ten days is changed, right. We were content a lot, not greedy. We have sympathy right. And also no anger at all. We made this cause, so we got the good effect a lot. After I was back from there, I think at least one month, my mind stay like that. After one month, it will change again (laughing). Because we are just normal people, that's why. We cannot do, just ten day is not enough. We have to practice every day.*

Chan Chan said she also became more patient, unselfish, and most importantly, she changed from being the “negative” person she did not want to be, to the “positive” or sympathetic person she understood she should be. Moreover, she noticed a number of other changes in her body: most significantly, her face and those of her fellow practitioners were different from normal peoples’ faces, they became “charming”. Through meditation, Chan Chan was able to address her shortcomings and achieve the purity of mind she sought, even if it was short-lived. As such, meditation is not merely a merit-making exercise, nor is the focus on attaining profound knowledge as such. Rather, meditation is so important because it is about clearing the mind and thereby achieving a fundamental change in her ‘self’, ultimately enabling her to be/become the ethical woman she desires to be. In other words, these technologies are a means for Chan Chan to shape and form herself into a subject who *does* life the right way.

Yet Chan Chan’s statement that the effects of meditation wore off, and that she does not practice it enough (something I heard repeated by several different people) raises interesting questions about its significance. In performing meditation, Chan Chan saw fundamental changes in her “mindset”, thereby realizing its effectiveness for herself: she infused the “meaning” of meditation with “truth” and “authority” through her practice. The effects wore off because she is an ordinary person and is too busy to perform it regularly, even though she said 15 minutes a day was enough. Perhaps the occasional but infrequent nature of her and others meditative practices leads them to repeat and strengthen the modern Burmese-Buddhist discourse on the unique power of meditation to produce change in the ‘self’. I believe her non-practice serves to further mythologize the power of meditation to create fundamental change, so that she sees it as *the* solution to overcoming her perceived shortcomings as an ethical subject. This belief has probably been strengthened by the example of one of her former teachers, a woman Chan Chan said could heal her body and ward off sickness through meditation alone.

## 9.6 Rebirth as a man

The ultimate goal of Chan Chan’s mundane world projects, and the work she performs on herself to attain her telos are inextricably intertwined and have one over-arching aim, a better rebirth. While rebirth as a human is a major achievement in itself (e.g. Ministry of Information, 2; Spiro 1982:81), like a lot of women, Chan Chan desires rebirth as a man<sup>118</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Several other people told me that the first few days at a meditation centre were gruelling (Field notes 2014).

<sup>118</sup> Rebirth as a man is also a step closer to nirvana, though it is not necessary to be reborn a man to achieve nirvana. Spiro referred to a “conventional prayer” recited by women: “Before attaining Nirvana, I pray that

(cf. Mi Mi Khaing 1984:6; Spiro 1982:81; 1977:260). While it is impossible to know her karma, the fact that many people already think Chan Chan is a man appears to be a source of hope that she is already close to achieving this goal.

*The first thing I'm sure is, um, I will get the human life again. I don't know yet, (if) I will be man or woman. But most people tell me, my mindset is not like a woman, like a man.*<sup>119</sup>

As I have argued above, the pursuit of telos offers women a form of deeply meaningful agency typically denied them in the pursuit of other projects inside serious games. Moreover, the goal of achieving rebirth as a man offers even greater agentive hope, albeit in the next life<sup>120</sup>

Such a rebirth appears to be attractive to women like Chan Chan for several reasons. Firstly, being a man would mean she had *hpoun* and *awza*. As such, she would likely have greater “freedom”, power and agentive space to be who she understands herself to be inside “serious games”, a “leader”. She would therefore face less restrictions in completing earthly projects. This power would also make it easier for her to make more merit. Thus, she would also avoid so much of the “stress” and disappointment she suffered as a woman who is typically ascribed subordinate roles. Furthermore, it is likely she sees a man's life as “more pleasant” because men do not suffer the same pains (*dukkha*) as women (Spiro 1977:260–61). Finally, even in the project of the ‘self’, women are restricted by gendered structures. Women cannot become monks, arahats (saints), nor can they achieve Buddhahood (e.g. Carbonnel 2009:267; Jordt 2007:162). However, for Chan Chan, it is the restriction of women's access to the key shrines at Myanmar's most important pagodas – Shwedagon, Golden Rock (Kyaiktiyo), and Mahamuni in Mandalay – which upset her most.

*At that time, I want to be a man because of, except the religion works, anywhere we can compete with them. But at the religious place, any, any man, he is naughty or stupid or clever or whatever he may be, he can go inside. We are not allowed to go there. I don't like (it) (laughing). That's why, at that moment, my feeling is so depressed.*

Nevertheless, Chan Chan does not question that women do not have access to these shrines, saying that this was from the “Buddha's time”. In doing so, she reinforces her understanding of *hpoun* as a fundamentally Buddhist concept, as Min Zin argued:

“The discourse of *hpoun* is so deeply embedded in Burmese culture that few even think to question it” (Min Zin 2001).

In this logic, if *hpoun* is essential to earthly and spiritual power, and only a man can possess it, then she must be reborn a man to have the agentive space to achieve greater goals. Reborn a man, and therefore a possessor of *hpoun* (and *awza*), she would be freed of these final barriers to developing the ‘self’. Indeed, Chan Chan's refusal or inability to question her inherent lack of *hpoun* as a woman could be seen as self-serving. That is, she does not wish to undermine the concept of *hpoun*, for that would be counterproductive to her supramundane project, the attainment of *hpoun* for herself. For both men and women, Min Zin argued: “the quest for *hpoun* is the paramount goal of life, one that lasts until the day one dies” (2001).

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I may be reborn as a male in a future existence” (1977, 260).

<sup>119</sup> Chan Chan can ultimately not know whether she will be reborn a man or not. It is impossible to know how much karma one has, as one cannot know the cause from one's previous lives (Field notes 2014).

<sup>120</sup> While Chan Chan did not appear to ascribe to the idea, even in this life, women may be able overcome the sexed barrier of *hpoun* by moving toward achieving the ten perfections (*parami*), which can take them to the first levels of enlightenment (Jordt 2005:49). Jordt argued that these conceptions are reshaping Burmese gender ideology (2005:49).

## 9.7 Summary

Taking place primarily on the level of the 'self', Chan Chan's focus on being the kind of woman she understands she both should be and desires to be offers her a level of agency and power which gendered relational roles typically preclude. She adopts a series of technologies of the self – some Buddhist, some mundane – in order to clear her mind and be/become her telos. In doing so, she seeks to be constantly prepared for the moment of death, when the quality of her cause in this life will determine the quality of her rebirth. This focus offers women like Chan Chan, inherently lacking in *hpoun*, the hope that should they work hard enough, both on their merit-making projects and on themselves, they will have the freedom and power to be who they want to be in their next life. Ultimately, even in their work on the 'self', women are prohibited from attaining the highest sources of merit and working toward sainthood and Buddhahood. Chan Chan, once again seeing her agency is exhausted, finds a paradoxical solution to her gendered lack of power. That is, she works toward a form of delayed agency and power, of proximate salvation, seeking recourse in the hope of being reborn a man.

## 10. REFLECTING ON ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION: IMAGINING AND REPRESENTING THE OTHER

Throughout our relationship (which has continued from my side through the process of writing), Chan Chan and I were engaged in a process of imagining the other. I came to know Chan Chan through the practices I observed and the stories she decided to tell me. The interview situation forced her to produce herself, her experiences and her way of seeing to me in a specific narrative framework in a specific setting and in the context of our relationship. Furthermore, the representations of Chan Chan in this thesis are filtered by and reproduced by me: a man, a stranger, an anthropology student, a westerner. In doing so, I apply theoretical tools with a fundamentally different goal in mind than Chan Chan had in being interviewed, that is, the production of an academic “fiction”. As such, Chan Chan was and is an ever-changing series of projections in my mind, as I think and re-think the things she said and did in an endeavour to get ever closer to her. The interpretations in this thesis are therefore necessarily my own. Despite the faithfulness with which I have tried to reproduce the various situations I have selected as important, as representative of her, she would probably barely recognise herself in the Chan Chan of these pages<sup>121</sup>.

In imagining the other, we cannot avoid over and under producing them as a type and as an individual in ways which differ drastically from how they produce themselves (Crapanzano 1980:134–6). Yet Chan Chan – or any interview partner – should not and cannot be merely reduced to a type. I hope to have shown this partly by reproducing Chan Chan’s understandings of herself and her practices in her life world. In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to draw out and understand Chan Chan’s agency within the different gendered Burmese-Buddhist roles she inhabited. Within these confines, I have illustrated how she attempted to maximize her agency, in most instances to exercise her control over the situation, to be the “leader” she understands herself to be.

On the whole, I have aimed to produce a picture of Chan Chan based on well-grounded conjecture (Rosenblatt 2002:894), drawing on acts that I deemed significant, ignoring others which I did not, and tying them into wider Burmese-Buddhist and “traditional” discourses. I hope, therefore, that this work is something of a well-grounded “fiction”, as Geertz would call it.

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<sup>121</sup> I thought my arrival in Myanmar had come about through a mixture of interest, determination and chance. But my somewhat clichéd anthropological narrative probably appeared absurd to Chan Chan. Rather, she told me, we had “linkage” in our past lives. It was only that way that we could possibly meet in this life. Thinking back on this, I began to realise how even the most banal set of “facts” are open to vastly different interpretations/representations within one’s own framework of understanding.

“All texts in the social sciences are in one way or another “fictions,” constructions, and we need to treat them as such, not as inviolable, unassailable statements of scientific truth” (Olson 1991:245).

In no way does acknowledging texts as “fiction” render all “truths” equal – and therefore the entire concept of truth irrelevant. Rather, like Geertz, I see this acknowledgement as a form of academic honesty and integrity, essential to the legitimacy of social scientific work. With its emphasis on producing contextualized knowledge, the ethnographic project is a powerful tool in producing understanding. In acknowledging the inherent limits of this or any academic research and writing, I endorse Rosenblatt’s statement:

“...I still want to learn something like truth. I still think it is possible to be ignorant or wrong, and I want to be less ignorant and no longer wrong” (2002:895).

Further, acknowledging my paper as a “fiction” does not absolve me, or any author, from the responsibility of representation, as Alcoff would point out (1991). As a researcher, a white man, and the producer of an academic text over which Chan Chan has no final say, I have assumed a position of power. Just as Chan Chan saw that her superordinate position in the field entailed responsibilities to me, so too does my superordinate position in producing this “truth” about her entail responsibilities. To do right by Chan Chan, to whom I am extremely grateful and indebted, and perhaps to ease my own conscience, I have attempted to uphold a core Theravada principle, the concept of *cetana*, or “right intention”. In doing so, I have tried to keep in mind the possible personal consequences of this paper for Chan Chan, which I believe are minimal. I also do not wish to downplay Chan Chan’s ability to represent herself, not only through the interviews she chose to grant me and the position of power she came to assume during them, but also through her political involvement and her own other agentive practices.

Speaking from my position for a woman with a limited voice, it could be argued that I am reinforcing gendered, racist power structures. I am anxious about that. This anxiety has been exacerbated by the way in which I perceived NGOs to misrepresent local opinions, even if this was intended to be in the best interests of locals, done with the best possible “intentions”. Nevertheless, I write with the conviction that Chan Chan’s story, and the stories of ‘everyday’ exceptional women and men like her deserve and need to be told. An awareness of the issues of representation should not lead to academic shoe-gazing. To do so is to passively accept the (mis)representations of our interlocutors promoted by organisations more powerful than ourselves as anthropologists. In short, I believe that to do nothing, to write nothing, is to abdicate rather than take on our own responsibilities, both academically and to our interview partners.

## 11. SUMMARY & DISCUSSION

### 11.1 Summary

In this thesis, I have argued that Chan Chan reproduces a neo-liberal/Burmese-Buddhist agency discourse. This discourse is empowering because it moves the focus away from who she relationally *is* (the restrictive roles she is typically ascribed inside serious games) to her life practice, to the things she *does*. Working in tandem with this discourse is Chan Chan's production of herself as a "leader", which is an attempt to cast herself in roles more powerful than those she is typically ascribed.

Looking at Chan Chan's negotiations with me, her parents, an imagined husband, and in her desire to meet a future husband reveals the fundamental discrepancies between her production of herself and her ability to achieve this in practice. As a skilled player of serious games, Chan Chan seeks to take up "leadership" roles when and where social norms do not preclude it. In doing so, she seeks to maximise her power and agentive space. This is most evident in her relationship with me, in which she became the "leader" on the bus, at the pagoda and during the interviews. But being a "leader" is not only about power. For it is only through the ethical and competent performance of her duties, the performance of the "meaning" of "leadership", that Chan Chan legitimises this claim. As an appropriate "leader", she is also aware of her ethical duties to me, the subordinate partner. This is evident in the great lengths she went to help me interview her. In embracing the "meaning" of the "leader", the power she assumes and the agentive space that this opens up inside relationships is restricted – albeit in different ways and to a lesser degree – by the need for ethical performance.

Indeed, mutual duties inside the hierarchical relationships that permeate Myanmar society are crucial in understanding a subject's agency and practices in serious games. Inside hierarchical relationships, superordinate partners do not have total power, and what power they do exercise should be practised in accordance with their duties to their subordinate(s). Negotiations of the reciprocal duties involved in superordinate and subordinate roles are clear in Chan Chan's relationship with her parents. Ascribed the subordinate position of daughter, Chan Chan does not turn to open resistance or "rebellion" to pursue her marriage project. Open 'rebellion' would mean failure to perform ethically and dutifully, a breach of hierarchical respect and *ana*, a failure to be who she understands herself to be. Moreover, it would be denial of the "meaning" which her project of supporting her parents provides, as well as missing out on the merit this project should provide her. In drawing on these understandings as subjects within the same discursive frames, Chan Chan's parents attempt to exert power over her by further emphasizing her duties

to them, by insisting on her obedience to them as a daughter. Yet her parents are acting from a discursively precarious position, for they have failed to perform their superordinate duty to her, to ensure that she becomes a woman through marriage. Precisely because the marriage project is also socially appropriate to her as a subject, Chan Chan is able to pursue it without directly resisting or refusing to support her parents. To do so, she draws on a different conceptualization “of the norm” (Mahmood 2005:24). She is able to perform appropriately as a daughter and as an unmarried woman, by rallying – however ‘reluctantly’ she may do this – the support of her uncles and aunts in her marriage project. In imagining meeting a wealthier man who would be a “leader” for her, Chan Chan is not only reinforcing her belief that men *should* be better than women, but also attempting to counter her parents’ only (socially) legitimate reasons to stop her marrying: that she does not need a man because she is already a “leader”, and because marriage would make it impossible for her to continue performing her filial duties.

The various roles Chan Chan is ascribed and ascribes herself both open up and restrict the agentive spaces in which she can practice. But these spaces are not fixed. In pursuing their projects, players like Chan Chan actively negotiate and renegotiate these roles and spaces by drawing on conceptions of the norm. Looking at different roles and games reiterates that agency is not something one has or does not. Rather, subjects must be observed in different settings and games to understand how they operate and negotiate within discursive frames. In doing so, we come to understand why and how certain games are so important – or challenging – to women like Chan Chan. It becomes clear then that Chan Chan’s career and work, for example, are important because they offer her an opportunity to define herself, to do something for herself, and to take on more power-filled positions than she is allowed as an unmarried woman living with her parents. Moreover, observing Chan Chan in a range of different situations allows us to see the complex negotiations women like her make to pursue their projects while remaining socially appropriate. As such, Chan Chan’s apparent passivity in her pursuit of finding a man becomes understood as a delicate balancing act, simultaneously performing socially appropriate femininity while employing a definitively active–passive strategy in searching for a man, or perhaps better understood, in seeking to be found. Looking at Chan Chan’s (or others) practice in isolated settings and without understanding her world as a subject would suggest, as it initially did to me, that she was an inconsistent, perhaps even moody agent. But in understanding Chan Chan as a subject and observing her in different games, I have come to quite the opposite conclusion. With such limited contact between ‘ordinary’ people, and such limited understanding of the discursive frames they operate within, it is perhaps little wonder that expats (like me) so often produce Myanmar people so simplistically and so negatively.

Burmese-Buddhist conceptions are fundamental to Chan Chan’s conception of the world. Perhaps most fundamental, at least in the context of this thesis, are the Law of Karma, ethics, agency, “manner”/“mindset” and the “self”. These ideas, in particular, are also the basis for her socially appropriate projects, and her agency and practice in pursuing them. The pursuit of being/becoming the type of woman she should be, and the type of woman she wants to be takes place largely at the level of the ‘self’. Thus, telos offers women like Chan Chan levels of agency typically denied them inside serious games<sup>122</sup>. As such, telos becomes central in her production of herself as an individual, in constructing a unique identity. While “most people” “pretend”, she is “honest”; while they are selfish, she is selfless; while they are “lazy”, she is “active”. Moreover, ethical performance inside serious games allows Chan Chan to construct herself as, or indeed to be, a ‘true’ “leader”. While her “leadership” is natural and legitimate, in many situations she is unable to take on the “leadership” role due to hierarchical and situational social appropriateness. Yet she understands her “leadership” performance as a justification for respect, and the agentive space to perform her subordinate duties in the way she wishes to. Ethical performance is not only essential to her claims to agentive space and “leadership”, but also to the pursuit

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<sup>122</sup> This refers to how I use “serious games” as an approach in this thesis. As noted earlier, Ortner insists that “serious games” can also take place with oneself (1996:12-21).

of her mundane and supramundane projects. In her interpretation of Burmese-Buddhist discourses and her focus on cause, it is only in pursuing her merit making projects with her telos that they contribute to a better rebirth, rebirth as a man. Conceiving of the 'self' as "mindset"/"manner", Chan Chan has a range of technologies available to her to release her "mind", from going shopping to over-eating to talking to friends. But it is only through meditation that she can achieve profound change in her "mindset"/"manner" and truly become her telos. Ultimately, as an individual she will be rewarded for ethical performance with a better rebirth<sup>123</sup>. And the others, those acting unethically in their focus on and enjoyment of greater mundane world success, will pay their karmic dues.

Even in the most subordinate roles Chan Chan is ascribed, she has some agentive space to act. Yet there are times when even a skilled player like Chan Chan senses that this space is exhausted, when she feels powerless to act in pursuit of her projects. At such times, she adopts desperate strategies. These strategies are desperate because they lack "meaning" ("truth" and "authority") to her, be it in turning to an astrologer to find out if she will marry, or in gathering magic sand for her sick mother. Yet these solutions are open to her, they do offer her a form of socially appropriate agentive space when nothing else, or at least nothing else "meaningful" to her, would. Desperate to do something, Chan Chan seeks to "imbue these conceptions with authority and truth" (Ortner 1999:145) through her practice. In one sense, she fails. She cannot make these practices meaningful to her, she cannot believe that the astrologer can really see her future, or that the sand can really make her mother well again. But in a more profound sense, these practices are meaningful to her. In visiting the astrologer, Chan Chan said she is able to "release" her "stress", to free her "mind". The most important reason she can release her "mind" is that, in the performance of this act and others like it, Chan Chan understands that she has done absolutely everything possible to pursue her projects. However inconsistent, however meaningless her strategies may appear on the surface, they are crucial to being who Chan Chan understands herself to be. That is, Chan Chan seeks to imbue her narrative of agency with "truth" and "authority" through these practices: she seeks to be who she produces herself to be, an "active", agentive woman pursuing her goals. In other words, Chan Chan may be a 'fragmented' woman, but this 'fragmentation', this inability to realise 'herself' inside "serious games" is "painful" to her (cf. Ortner 1996:7-10). In all her practices, and most clearly in her most desperate practices, it becomes evident that Chan Chan is seeking coherence, is seeking to perform and therefore to be who she *really* 'is', an "active" woman, a woman who "leads" her own life.

## 11.2 Discussion

### 11.2.1 Gender "equality"

While women in Myanmar are constructed as "equal" and "free", this is undermined by discourses of women as spiritually, morally, intellectually and authoritatively inferior to men. This "simultaneous encouragement and undermining of women's agency" is not unique to Myanmar, as Ortner's statement about Sherpa women demonstrates (1996:17). As a subject, Chan Chan is typically ascribed (and ascribes herself) subordinate positions inside hierarchical relationships. The gendered limits on her power, "freedom" and

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<sup>123</sup> Moreover, her performance explains the limits of her success in this world, because ethical people pay: her family is not wealthier because her father was an honest worker, her success in achieving her projects is inhibited by her ethical behaviour, the nation is held back by its moral superiority over other nations. In doing so, she reproduces a middle-class and nationalist discourse of ethical superiority to undermine visible reality - that she, the middle-class, and indeed the nation - have been effectively locked out of the prosperity that the (constitutive) other has enjoyed.

opportunities are unsurprisingly “stressful” and frustrating for Chan Chan, especially given her production of herself as a “leader”. Yet Chan Chan apparently desired to meet a man superior to her in every way – a man who would be *her* “leader”.

What can being “equal” or “equality” mean if one assumes that men, as possessors of *hpoun* and *awza*, are naturally superior to women. In popular understandings of the Law of Karma, an understanding which is vital to Chan Chan’s supramundane project, men are men because they have earned it through their past cause. *Hpoun* is indeed a self-legitimizing concept, for power can only be attained and held if one has sufficient *hpoun*, and therefore has the moral authority to hold that power (Min Zin 2001). As such, hierarchical relationships between men and women are naturalised and legitimated within a Burmese-Buddhist conceptual framework. In her own desire to be with a man who is “better” than her in every way, Chan Chan also insisted that they must be “equal”. To be sure, in such hierarchical relationships, not only would Chan Chan as the subordinate partner have duties to her husband, he too would have duties to her. Envisaging herself as a ‘good’ and appropriate woman, “equality” would be achieved with a man who himself was a ‘good’ and appropriate man: a man who himself would inhabit the role of the appropriate husband as she would inhabit the role of the appropriate wife. In this logic, the performance of the “mutually supportive roles of husband and wife” (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:16) is understood as being “equal”, as “equality”. Mi Mi Khaing’s claim makes this understanding clear:

“Sex roles are totally accepted and with the woman as house manager, this very acceptance is, in a sense, a statement of equality in which for (sic) every male participation, there must be a corresponding female participation and vice-versa. Down the ages the proverbs echo this complementary, equal and fair juxtaposition which sets for every sphere of life a 50–50 basis” (1984:59).

As such, popular discourses claiming that women enjoy equality are based on a conception of fundamental differences between women and men. Equality cannot exist in the dictionary sense of the word because men and women are not equal, they cannot be: Burmese-Buddhist conceptions preclude such an idea.

The academic arguments for (near) gender equality, or at least the very “high status” of women in Myanmar, have tended to make a different set of assumptions. Primarily, they have failed to acknowledge that these claims are almost invariably focused on the rights of married women (e.g. Spiro 1977, 1993a, 1997; Nash 1965; Mi Mi Khaing 1984). As such, they elide the substantial differences in power and “freedom” between married and unmarried women. Indeed, for women like Chan Chan, an important motivation for marriage was a perceived increase in power, switching their (primary) deference from their father to their husband, an apparent “equal”, and changing from an *apyou* to an *a-ou*. As a mother, Chan Chan would attain a level of power that was not available to her in other relationships. Moreover, married women enjoy a freedom of movement that an *apyou* cannot (Noack 2011:190), legitimised by the need to retain their social appropriate (sexual) “innocence”. As women age and thereby presumably lose their apparent threat as objects of sexual desire and moral temptation to men, their freedom appears to increase. Furthermore, attitudes of and to young women indicate vast differences based on other demographics including urban or rural living, social class and education levels (Myo Thwin 2007:140ff). Finally, institutionalised power differences which disadvantage girls and women in Myanmar are too numerous to list but include greater poverty, limited access to education and professional work, and virtual non-representation in upper echelons of economic, political and military power. These factors, too, have been either overlooked or unjustly downplayed in academic works emphasising the apparent “high status” or “equality” women enjoy in Myanmar.

### 11.2.2 Myanmar modernities

As subjects, women like Chan Chan are highly active in trying to renegotiate repressive gendered discourses in pursuit of their projects. Chan Chan disputes social inequalities between men and women as fundamental “human rights” issues. Yet women at all levels of Myanmar society are also active in reiterating repressive gendered discourses (Tharaphi Than 2014:1–4), undermining any simple notion that women are working together fighting patriarchal power in the service of some kind of “sisterhood”. Indeed, the ambivalence of Chan Chan’s own position is seen in her insistence that she is (like) a man because she is a “leader”, her insistence on finding a husband who is better than her in every way, or in upholding (to some degree) the concepts of *hpoun* and *awza*, and seeking them for herself, albeit in the next life.

Like Chan Chan, the women in Chaw Chaw’s study all reported that they “chose” to support their families (2003:221). Within Burmese-Buddhist discourses, this is especially important because only acts performed “freely” are merit-making (Lehman 2005:1332). In doing so, Chan Chan and these women perform/are the ‘good’ daughter. Yet, Chan Chan’s insistence that she performed her duties to her parents “freely” was undermined when she also insisted that looking after her parents was her “duty”, that she was not “free”, that she had to choose what she should choose. That is, in her production of herself, Chan Chan drastically over-emphasises her “freedom” and power, producing herself as a somewhat “bourgeois” agent (Ortner 1996:8). In producing themselves as such powerful agents and focusing on what one *does* rather than what one *is*, women like Chan Chan may achieve greater empowerment by undermining “naturalised” gender differences. Conversely however, these claims also reiterate and thereby strengthen the discourse of women as possessing “freedom”, as empowered, as “equal” to men. Once again, the serious game Chan Chan engages in with her parents demonstrates how her production of herself as highly agentive may well be a strategy, even a self-belief, but it is most certainly not a practical fact. Furthermore, the relationship between Chan Chan and her mother, like other unmarried women and their mothers (cf. Chit Ko Ko 2007:69), demonstrates that women are also essential in upholding, reproducing and drawing on gendered and hierarchical discourses to exercise power over and to shame other women, both inside and outside the home. Operating within complex and competing discursive frameworks in the pursuit of their goals, women like Chan Chan not only renegotiate, but also actively reiterate discourses disadvantageous to an imagined “sisterhood”. In other words, while subjects like Chan Chan are active in undermining – and perhaps even directly opposing – the gendered discourses which restrict their agentive spaces, it is also clear that their practices cannot be made to simply fit into broader western liberal feminist models. Such pre-fabricated models are simply not available to her: modernities are not simply imported and taken on wholesale, they are adapted and made possible only through their articulation with meaningful discourses, as Chan Chan’s conception of agency so poignantly demonstrates.

In looking at Chan Chan’s life from an agency perspective, my aim has been to contribute to the small but growing discussion about how ‘everyday’ people, and women in particular, understand their life worlds and how they do life in contemporary Myanmar. It is to be hoped that the lack of research on the discourses which construct, shape, restrict and make possible the lives of subjects will be re-dressed amidst the surge in academic research in Myanmar. This, of course, is a project anthropology is perfectly suited to.

## EPILOGUE

A few months after these interviews, Chan Chan told me on facebook that she had been introduced to a man by her relatives.

They will marry in April 2016.

They have purchased an apartment near her parents' house.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Fennessy completed a Master in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Göttingen in 2015. He is particularly interested in biographical research on how 'ordinary' people do life in the context of broader social phenomenon, especially in Southeast Asia.

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