

## PREFACE

This is a story of unease. For anthropologists, it is always an awkward task to document and question the ways of life of other people. On a topic such as surrogacy, the tensions become acute: it is a subject that inevitably divides people who take various ethical positions on the issue. Listening to the personal stories of people whose desire to form a family has led them to choose overseas surrogacy, who can say it is wrong that they grasp an opportunity to pursue the joys of family life? There is a danger that discussions of overseas surrogacy descend into validations of only one type of family, or denials of the agency of the surrogates involved. As I hope will be evident in this book, one cannot deny the legitimacy of people's claims to form a family, the real suffering they undergo, and the enormous efforts and difficult decisions they make to seek families through surrogacy, nor their own ethical concerns on the issue.

But as a social scientist, it is my job also to think beyond the individual scale, and consider more broadly the development of an industry at a regional scale. The use of the word "industry" in this context is offensive to some, but as I will argue later, I think it is appropriate as a means of describing the various integrated businesses and service industries that rapidly grew to provide surrogacy across Asia. I pursue the analysis of the overseas surrogacy industry on a number of scales as a means to explore the complexities of this issue. I do not wish to criticize the individual parents or surrogates who have most generously opened up and provided their most intimate and precious details of their personal decisions around surrogacy. But it is valid to raise concerns about how the industry that has evolved is organized and operates.

My personal experience in undertaking this research over many years has been marked by constant challenges to my own understandings, as I have come face-to-face with the real people behind the stereotypes of surrogates, intended parents, facilitators, and doctors. The desire to undertake this research first emerged following my earlier research on IVF in Thailand in 2009, as I became aware of the growing interest in the country as a destination for foreigners seeking IVF procedures including surrogacy. It was further piqued when, in 2010, a work colleague announced that he and his partner were pursuing surrogacy in India at a time when legislative changes made travel for overseas surrogacy by Queensland residents illegal. He had read my early writings on surrogacy and wrote an email to me shortly after the birth of his twin sons. Offended at my previous writing on surrogacy in Thailand, which called for greater regulations, he accused me of moralizing on what had been a carefully planned decision in his case, as he and his partner had tried to balance their desires with their own

ethical concerns. His criticisms included accusations of colonialist stereotyping of all Indian surrogates as poor women without agency, and denying them a legitimate and lucrative opportunity to earn a significant amount of money that could be life changing. In his email, he accused me of setting myself up as a feminist moralizing judge over personal reproductive decisions. Of course, his email upset me; it reminded me that academic writings are read by and have real implications for their readers and subjects. In my response, I echoed what I am writing here—that as an anthropologist my role is to describe and analyze at a social scale. My work is intended not to vilify individual actions but rather to describe an industry and its social implications and perhaps to suggest how it might be improved for the protection of all those involved. It is my hope that it does not cause distress for the children, families, parents, or surrogates involved, but instead affirms the complexity of this issue and the many rights and responsibilities that must be balanced.

Having said this, however, I do not resile from criticizing the real harms associated with surrogacy that have been documented in Asia. In this book, I discuss cases of criminal activity, trafficking, and child abandonment that represent rare but real instances of damage to people and, more broadly, to the reputation of all who seek to form families through surrogacy. Of course abuses occur in every industry, yet to deny their existence does little to advance the development of equitable, safe, and ethical surrogacy. And it is important to understand how various incidents have been pivotal in the regulation of and political reactions to the industry in the region. They are included in this book not as salacious details but as marking turning points in public discourse and political action on the issue.

Yet I also document the very real joys, wonderments, and delights experienced by families formed through surrogacy. It is difficult to convey the care and love evident among the families I have been privileged to meet at surrogacy conferences, in clinics, and through interviews. These families come in all shapes and sizes, and it should never be forgotten that their children were so very wanted, to the extent that their parents went through enormous efforts to conceive them. The families themselves should not be defined by the technique used for the conception and birth of their children; the reality is that the experience of surrogacy is but a starting point for a lifetime of care and love. Nevertheless, families formed through surrogacy face a set of unique challenges, such as the personal decisions they must make around how to tell their children about their birth, whether and how to incorporate the role of the surrogate as fictive kin, and a number of legal complications regarding the citizenship of their children and legal recognition of their parentage. The degree of complexity depends upon the nationality and citizenship of the parents, the nationality of their surrogate, and the country or even state within which they undertake surrogacy. This book addresses some of the consequences of the legal labyrinth for families involved in the study.

Finally, in this book I primarily explore the international surrogacy industry as it emerged in Thailand and Southeast Asia. I describe a particular time and place, and therefore I do not intend to describe the forms of the industry in other parts of the world. Even so, the insights I provide can be used to compare how the industry has developed elsewhere. As other anthropologists have shown, the introduction of IVF technologies has taken different social forms in various cultural and social settings, and so too with surrogacy. Undertaking surrogacy in Laos, Ukraine, or the United States is a different phenomenon in each case, within specific social, cultural, and economic contexts.

All mistakes are mine, and I hope this book reflects my curiosity, empathy, and respect for my informants.

