

Challenging Stereotypes in Europe-Thailand Transnational Migration: Non-conventional Unions, Mobilities, and (Re)productive Labor

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The migration flows connecting Thailand and Europe have constructed social spaces in which different stereotypes regarding Thais and Europeans emerge, perpetuate, and circulate, thereby affecting to various extents the lives of these individuals. To challenge these stereotypes, the present special issue takes into account the mechanisms of social categorization at transnational and local dimensions in three critical steps. First, it adopts an inclusive stance by not limiting itself to heterosexual relationships involving Thais and Europeans. Second, it shifts the scholarly gaze from marriage and family issues to Thai migrants' mobilities in spatial, social, and intergenerational terms. And third, it highlights Thai migrants' engagement in the labor market as intimate workers and entrepreneurs to uncover the factors shaping their (re)productive labor and social incorporation in their receiving countries. Using an intersectional approach, this special issue presents six empirically grounded case studies to unveil often-neglected dimensions and complexities of Europe-Thailand transnational migration.

Keywords: Europe-Thailand Transnational Migration; Mobilities; Non-conventional Unions; (Re)productive Labor; Stereotypes



INTRODUCTION

Thai migration to Europe¹ has been generally composed of women, who most often play overlapping roles as wives, mothers, workers, and citizens (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Fresnoza-Flot & Merla, 2018; Mix & Piper, 2003; Suksomboon, 2007; Webster, 2017). In recent years, Europe has become the destination of migrant *kathoe* (transgender women) (Pravattiyagul, 2021; Thongkrajai, 2012)

1 We refer here to Europe as a geographic region comprising Eastern, Western, Northern (including Channel Islands), and Southern subregions (UNSD, 2022).

and Thai seasonal workers (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). In addition, Thai tourists (Trupp & Bui, 2015) and Thai entrepreneurs (Sunanta, 2021) add complexities to the emerging portraits of Thai migration, notably in terms of gender, sexuality, and social class. At the same time, Thailand has become a long-stay tourism and retirement destination for an increasing number of Europeans (Bottero, 2015; Jaisuekun & Sunanta, 2016; Lapanun, 2019; Roux, 2011; Scuzzarello, 2020). European long-stayers in Thailand are predominantly men, many of whom are in romantic/marital relationships with Thai women and, less visibly, in same-sex partnerships with Thai gay men. These “both-ways’ migration pathways” (Statham et al., 2020, p. 1514) between Europe and Thailand represent “transnational social spaces” (Faist, 2004, p. 331), in which various stereotypes regarding Thais and Europeans emerge, perpetuate, and circulate. These spaces are well connected to translocal² ones where social categorization persists as one of the remnants of the past.

In this special issue, “stereotype” is understood as the process of “Othering”, during which imagined differences are socially (re)produced between the “us” and “them” (Lister, 2004, p. 101) and the “categorization of persons” (Dyer, 1999, paragraph 4) based on such differences takes place. As Hall (1997) explains, “(s)tereotyping reduces people to a few simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (p. 257). This process affects individuals’ social incorporation and shapes their everyday lives. In the case of Thais, Othering stereotypes racialize, sexualize, class³, and/or genderize these individuals and sometimes their families, which most often leads to their social stigmatization, discrimination, or exclusion in one or both ends of migration (Fresnoza-Flot, 2019; Pravattiyagul, 2018; Sunanta, 2013). Some of these stereotypes include the heteronormative views that Thais (notably women) are “sex workers” (Ten Brummelhuis, 1994, as cited in Lapanun, 2018) and “passive objects” (Angeles & Sunanta, 2007, p. 22), that they occupy the lower echelon in the social class hierarchy in their country of origin (Sunanta, 2013), that they form heterosexual couples with foreign men to migrate abroad and improve their social class position (see below the section, “Local theoretical lens of social categorizations”), and that they are economically dependent on their Western⁴ partners (Spanger, 2013). Despite scholarly works contradicting these stereotypes (Ruenkaew, 2009; Sims, 2012; Spanger, 2013; Webster & Haandrikman, 2014), such categorizing generalizations about Thai migrants in Europe and Thais in couple with Europeans and other Westerners in Thailand continue to thrive as recent studies suggest (Limpriwatana, 2019; Suphsert, 2021).

Aiming to challenge this social stereotyping, the present special issue borrows Crenshaw’s intersectionality perspective (1989) that has originally been used to unveil the social oppression of Black women in the United States of America (US) at the intersection of “categories” (p. 139) of difference, specifically the gender-race-social class trio. These categories may play a role not only in the (re)construction of stereotypes about

2 This term means the different scales present within a nation: family, community, village, city, and region, among others (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

3 The word “class” as verb or noun is understood in this paper as referring to the category “social class” (Bourdieu, 1997; in the sense of Weber, see Roth & Wittich, 1978).

4 This adjective is used in this special issue to qualify people, objects, symbols, and ideas originating from the so-called ‘Western countries’ in Europe, North America, and Oceania.

Thais in Europe-Thailand transnational spaces but also in the way these individuals confront them or live with them. To grasp other factors beyond the gender-race-class trio, we follow McCall's (2005) intercategorical approach to intersectionality, which pays attention to "existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions" (p. 1771). In this vein, we take into account the mechanisms of social categorization at both transnational and translocal dimensions, in three critical steps. Firstly, this special issue adopts an inclusive stance by considering in the analysis both heterosexual and non-heterosexual relationships involving Thais and Europeans in Thailand. Secondly, it shifts the scholarly gaze from marriage and family issues to Thai migrants' mobilities in spatial, social, and intergenerational terms, which unveils other dimensions (e.g., religious, and entrepreneurial) of Thai migration to this region. And thirdly, it highlights Thai migrants' engagement in the labor market as intimate workers and entrepreneurs, thereby uncovering the factors that shape and affect their (re)productive labor and social incorporation in their European receiving countries. These three steps correspond to the three overarching themes of the special issue: non-conventional unions, mobilities, and (re)productive labor. These three aspects help to uncover mechanisms of social categorization as they are made possible through and constructed around specific categories of difference, such as gender, age, and social class. The above themes will be illustrated by six case studies inscribed in different research fields: women migration studies, queer migration studies, and gender and sexuality studies. All of them adopt qualitative data-gathering and analytical methods, as well as propose research prospects for the study of Thai migration to Europe and European migration to Thailand.

In the following sections, we bring to the fore the original contributions of our special issue. First, to understand stereotypes, we revisit the literature on transnational migration (i.e., human spatial movements traversing nation-state borders) to identify the categories of difference that need to be considered to attain the objective of our special issue. Second, we provide the contexts and origin of Othering stereotypes in Europe-Thailand social spaces to understand their causes and development through time. Third, we introduce a Thai theoretical lens of social categorization to grasp the mechanism behind stereotyping and to put into question social⁵ assumptions regarding migrants in Europe-Thailand social spaces. Fourth, we present the empirical papers in this special issue and discuss the intersectional ways of challenging stereotypes, which in the process contributes to their deconstruction. We conclude by suggesting some future directions in studying transnational migration linking Europe and Thailand.

UNDERSTANDING STEREOTYPES IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

The Othering of individuals, groups, or populations in the context of transnational migration has been the object of scholarly investigations for the last decades. It

⁵ This qualifier in our special issue encompasses different dimensions, namely economic and socio-cultural.

has been widely examined in its different dimensions in the so-called ‘South-North’ movements (de Hart, 2019; Pande, 2017; Pérez & Freier, 2022), ‘North-South’ mobilities (Augusto, 2021; Stoler, 2002), and more recently ‘South-South’ migrations (Debonneville et al., 2019). In many studies, colonial and post-colonial representations (textual and visual), discourses (socio-legal, cultural, and historical), and individuals’ subjective experiences occupy the core of the analysis. Such an approach unveils the factors that construct and reproduce Othering stereotypes targeting specific group(s) of people in transnational migration settings.

In stereotyping migrants, racialization based on their supposed phenotypical and/or socio-cultural characteristics different from the majority population has been documented in many migrant-receiving countries. This form of Othering visibly affects migrants’ labor-market incorporation. For instance, “newly arrived migrants” most often experience “unemployment and underemployment” (Liu, 2019, p. 175) in Canada, where “it is the ‘colour’ of the skill associated with immigrants’ skin colour rather than the skill itself” that matters (Guo, 2015, p. 244). The coloring of skills involves the devaluation and denigration of their foreign credentials in the labor market and the framing of their foreign accents “as a lack of communication skills” (Guo, 2015, p. 245). The stereotype that appears to come out from this process is that, regardless of their skills, migrants with socially undesirable skin color are less fitted to occupy high-status employment than insider citizens. Such a stereotype also has a gender dimension: for example, Muslim migrant women experience difficulties in finding employment in the Netherlands, where they are socially assumed to be “victims of an oppressive system”, “deviant and deficient” (Eijberts & Roggeband, 2016, p. 133). The case of these women attests that stereotypes stem from intersecting racialization and genderization (based on common-held expectations regarding femininities and masculinities).

These intersecting processes can also interact with migrants’ national origin and/or ethnicity. Some migrants originating from a specific country and belonging to a certain ethnic group are often categorized in their receiving country based on certain imagined qualities deemed important for specific sectors of the economy. For example, ethnic- and gender-based stereotypes regarding Filipino migrant women as “good with children” (Anderson, 2001, p. 677), “active workers” (Zontini, 2010, p. 29), and with “TLC” (tender loving care) (Guevarra, 2014, p. 141) make them highly desirable in the domestic work, hospitality, and nursing sectors. These stereotypes may acquire a sexual dimension in a social context where some of these migrants perform jobs that transgress certain moral expectations. During the 1980s and 1990s, Filipino migrant women in Japan, regardless of their educational backgrounds and professions, were generally assumed to be *Japayuki* (‘Japan-bound’ entertainers in the intimate industry) (Da-anoy-Satake, 2000), which socially deemed them ‘victims’ of trafficking (Parreñas, 2011). Certain migrants undergo hyper-sexualization, which results in discrimination and criminalization: for example, the case of Venezuelan migrant women in Peru who are stereotyped as “attractive” and “easy” (Pérez & Freier, 2022, p. 3).

Stereotyping of migrants also occurs at the intersection of family situation, sexuality, and social class. Migrant women in couple with an insider citizen are often stereotyped as “docile wives” (Da-anoy-Satake, 2000, p. 2), “mail-order brides” (Sims, 2012, p. 169), a person with “bad sexual morality” (Bally, 2005, p. 95), or “manipulative

opportunists who marry solely for money” (Park, 2017, p. 120), as they are perceived to originate from economically developing countries and therefore ‘poor’ in money and moral character. Their marriages are generally perceived to be hypergamic, implying that their natal country’s economic progress defines their social class belonging. This stereotype may take form alongside the exoticization of migrants, which can provide economic gains or pose social challenges to these individuals. For instance, WoDaabe Fulani migrant men from Niger who are considered exotic in Belgium easily find clients for their jewelry (Loftsdóttir, 2018). Another example are Russian marriage migrant women who are socially viewed as “exotic creatures” alongside the stereotypes of being “mail-order brides” and “secret service agents”, which affects their adjustment in the US (Shpeer & Howe, 2020, p. 318).

Although the above review of the literature provides only a brief overview, it unveils the salient categories of difference influencing the construction of social stereotypes about migrants, namely ‘race’⁶, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, and family situation. To challenge stereotypes, these categories may be useful to consider following McCall’s (2005) intercategory approach, notably the counterimages they may produce during their intersections.

CONTEXT AND ORIGIN OF OTHERING STEREOTYPES IN EUROPE-THAILAND SOCIAL SPACES

Stereotypes of Thai-European partnership in both Thailand and European countries are entangled with Europe-Thailand gendered encounters from the colonial past to the post-colonial present. In a review article, Lapanun (2018) shows that European man-Thai woman liaisons can be traced back to the 16th century when European male traders who arrived in Ayutthaya, an old Siamese kingdom, took local women as wives. More recently, during and in the aftermath of World War II (1939-1947), as many as 2,000 Dutch prisoners of war who were present in Thailand registered their marriages to Thai women (Ten Brummelhuis, 1994, as cited in Lapanun, 2018). After the war, some Dutch men took their Thai wives to the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), other countries in Europe, and the Netherlands. Even back then, war brides in the Netherlands struggled with the presumption among the Dutch that Thai women were associated with the sex industry (Ten Brummelhuis, 1994, as cited in Lapanun, 2018). But most relevant to the stereotype of Thai-European transnational marriages/partnerships today are the Cold War militarism in the 1960s-1970s and the subsequent boom of Thailand’s international sex tourism industry. During the US military actions in Vietnam from 1964 to 1975, the Thai military government allied with the US and allowed it to set up military bases in Thailand and to use the country as the rest and recreation (R&R) destination for US servicemen. The entanglement between sex work and militarism is obvious in Thailand, where night entertainment businesses were developed to serve US military men (Truong, 1990). These facilities were later developed for the international sex tourism industry after the US military had left (Bishop & Robinson, 1998; Truong, 1990). The image of Thailand as a tourism

⁶ We put this category within inverted commas to emphasize that it does not biologically exist but rather is socially (re)produced.

destination has thus been associated with an affordable sexual playground for foreign men, particularly those from Europe and Japan (Bishop & Robinson, 1998; Cohen, 1996).

Due to internal inequality and uneven development among different regions and economic sectors in Thailand, women from rural and agricultural backgrounds from the Northeast (*Isan*) region have since the 1970s been overrepresented in tourist-oriented red-light districts in Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket, and Koh Samui, Thailand's popular tourism destinations. The current Thai-European transnational marriage trend, which peaked in the 2000s, started with Cold War and post-Cold War international sex tourism as some Thai bar girls/sex workers developed long-term relationships that led to marriage with their Western customers (Cohen, 1996). Sex work and marriage were closely intertwined in the earlier days of Thai women's migration to Europe in the 1970s. Since 1975, Thai women have increasingly migrated to Germany as sex workers or wives of German nationals due to relaxed immigration regulations at that time and the legalization of prostitution (Mix & Piper, 2003; Ruenkaew, 2014). It is no coincidence that German men rank among the top sex tourists to Thailand and foreign husbands of Thai women from the *Isan* region (Seepai & Senerat, 2010).

It is out of this historical context that the stereotype of Thai wives in Thai-European marriages as poorly educated sex workers from lower social strata has been formed. Studies have pointed out that the focus on their (previous) engagement in sex work reduces the complexity of Thai women in transnational partnerships, who are at the same time mothers, daughters, and sisters who take care of the well-being of their left-behind family members (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Fresnoza-Flot & Merla, 2018; Lapanun, 2022, this issue; Suksomboon, 2008) and gain cosmopolitan awareness from their exposure to other countries' ways of living (Keyes, 2014; Sunanta & Angeles 2013; Tosakul, 2010). The enduring image of Thai wives in Europe as sex workers from lower-class backgrounds also misrepresents the fact that recently Thai wives in Europe have come from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Sinsuwan, 2018) and lead various social and economic lives in European destination countries (Sinsuwan, 2018; Sunanta, 2022, this issue). Other aspects of their lives, such as their role in the formation of the Thai diasporic community and the transmission of Thai cultural heritage to their children (Chuenglertsiri, 2020; Fresnoza-Flot, 2022, this issue), evade the understanding of mainstream society in the receiving countries because of the dominant gendered, classed, sexualized, and racialized stereotypes of Thai wives in Europe. In addition, the fixed stereotypical images gloss over the dynamics of European-Thai couples who have aged over the decades and whose migration pathways are not linear, as they consider or decide to relocate to Thailand in their old age (Brown, 2022, this issue; Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022, this issue).

LOCAL THEORETICAL LENS OF SOCIAL CATEGORIZATIONS

Stereotypes of Thai-European partnerships in Thai society are equally degrading and embedded in the Othering mechanism of the Thai system of social categorization. Scholars of Thai studies have noted that in Thai social categorization, social class,

ethnicity, and regional identities are intertwined. Conceptualizing the ethno-spatial relations in the 19th century Siamese state, Winichakul (2000, p. 41) describes a system of social categorization in which one's geographical and 'civilizational' distance from the central power in Bangkok marks his/her place in the Siamese/Thai hierarchical social order. He posits that because of their simple ways of life and settlements in the periphery of the state power, the *chaopa* (wild people) and the *chao bannok* (the multi-ethnic peasant villagers) were considered "the Others Within" under the supremacy of the Bangkok ruling elite.

Since the Isan region is home to a high proportion of Thai women and transgender people who are in partnership with Europeans, understanding *Isan* identity in Thai society sheds light on the stereotype of Thai-European transnational intimate partnerships. Constituting one-third of the total population of Thailand, inhabitants of today's Isan region are descendants of those who moved from the other side of the Mekong River, in today's Laos PDR (People's Democratic Republic), and inherited Lao linguistic and cultural traits (Keyes, 1967). While the urban economy in Bangkok and Eastern industrial zones grew rapidly during the decade of the Thai economic boom from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, *Isan* was the most economically marginalized region of Thailand and has been the origin of rural-to-urban as well as transnational labor migration (Curran et al., 2005; Keyes, 2014; Mills, 1999). In the eyes of many urban, middle-class Thais in Bangkok, *Isan* people are perceived as working-class, rural people who are ethnically and culturally inferior (Keyes, 1967; McCargo & Hongladarom, 2004).

The stereotype of *Isan mia farang* (Westerners' wives from Isan) as morally loose women who use their bodies and sexuality through an intimate partnership with Western men to climb up the socio-economic ladder is prevalent among urban Thais (Sunanta, 2013). This gendered, classed, and ethnicized stereotype of *Isan* women was publicly reiterated in 2019 in an opinion piece entitled "Characters determine fate" by Pensri Phaolaungthong, a female columnist of *Matichon Weekly*, a prominent Thai periodical. Pensri Phaolaungthong, a woman from an urban middle-class background, criticizes partnering with Westerners for socio-economic mobility as a cultural characteristic of *Isan* women who favor relying on others to improve their life chances rather than working hard through gaining higher education (Phaolaungthong, 2019). Without considering structural constraints faced by Thai people in the lower social strata, Pensri is critical of what she perceives as working-class, rural women's choices to take an easy and undignified way out of poverty. This public stigmatization was, however, met with an outcry from many *Isan* women who pointed out the author's ignorance and social class bias; the author and publisher had to express formal apologies.

Farang, a casual Thai term referring to white Westerners from Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, has a special place in the Thai social categorization. According to Wanichakul (2000), the Thai/Siamese hierarchical social classification is measured by the group's temporal and geographical distance to 'civilization':

Since its inception Siam has always been a hierarchical domain, differentiated not only by class and status, but by ethno-geography as well. And given the implicit temporal implication of any anthropology, this chapter argues that this

Siamese ethnography of Siam was also a temporalizing practice, locating and juxtaposing peoples, including the elite themselves, in a new linear (progressive, temporal) cosmic order called civilization. (p. 41)

According to this Siamese concept of social categorization, *farang* occupy a superior place because of their power of knowledge in the forms of modern technology, architecture, and urban planning, as well as modern legal, educational, and administrative systems that the Thai elite looked up to. The 19th-century Thai ruling elite adopted Western forms of etiquette, dress, habituation, patronage, and pageantry to express themselves as part of the cosmopolitan class in the international arena and legitimate ruling class in the newly bounded Thai modern nation state at home (Harrison, 2010; Loos, 2006; Peleggi, 2002). However, scholars also note the ambivalent views towards the West in the 19th-century Thai nationalistic discourse, in which the West was depicted as the powerful but suspicious Other (Kitiarsa, 2010) who was materially advanced but spiritually less developed (Winichakul, 2010). More recently, the Asian economic crisis that started in Thailand in 1997, leaving many Thais to struggle for survival, reinforced the localist/nationalist notion that Western consumerism has detrimental effects on Thai society.

Farang's moral decadence is most pronounced in the area of sexuality, with the dominant discourse in Thailand that attributes homosexuality in Thai society to a moral decline influenced by the adoption of Western culture (Jackson, 1997; Sinnott, 2004). The arrival of US GIs in the 1960s and the pursuant development of sex tourism in Thailand for predominantly *farang* men further highlight the perceived sexual decadence of Western people. A prevalent stereotype in Thailand of *farang* men who are in partnership with lower-class Thai women is that of *farang khinok*, which literally means 'bird shit *farang*', referring to low-quality Westerners who are sex tourists and undesirable in their own countries (Maher & Lafferty, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016).

The partnership between *farang* men and Thai women from a rural, working-class background, most notably from *Isan*, is viewed negatively in the Thai mainstream society because it involves two groups of morally dubious Others—*farang* men and *Isan* women. These transnational partnerships invoke classed, gendered, and racialized stereotypes, among others, that our special issue confronts.

CONTRIBUTIONS: INTERSECTIONAL WAYS OF CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

The present special issue comprising six empirical papers pays attention to the intersectionality of not only the gender-'race'-class trio but also sexuality and other categories of difference in forming the social milieu of Europe-Thailand transnational subjects. Our important contribution is emphasizing the complexity and dynamics of social class, gender, and familial, marital and inter-generational relations in transnational contexts and over life courses. The papers in this special issue put into question specific social stereotypes about Thais and their European partners through three intersectional ways: exposing diversity by looking at non-conventional unions, re-examining mobility assumptions, and unveiling the productive and reproductive labor dimensions. These ways provide nuances of how migration and (non) migrants in Europe-Thailand social spaces have been understood so far.

Exposing Diversity Through Non-conventional Unions

Several stereotypes about Thais in couple with or seeking Western partners - ‘sex workers’, ‘poor’, ‘only after money’, ‘submissive’, and ‘dependent’, among others - take shape at the intersection of several categories of differences. The special issue challenges these stereotypes by exposing the diversity of non-conventional unions of heterosexual Thai women (see Brown, 2022; Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Lapanun, 2022; Sunanta, 2022, this issue) and their transgender counterparts (*kathoe*) with Western men (Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022; Thongkrajai, 2022, this issue). This exposition nuances our understanding of the logic, emotions, and practices involved in the formation and/or dynamics of Thai-European couples, and at the same time, unveils Thais’ agency resulting from their intersecting identities and subjectivities.

In her article, Brown finds that Thai women and their Dutch husbands who relocate from the Netherlands to Thailand do not fit the stereotypical image of Thai-Western couples settling in Thailand as old and retired. She observes that young couples relocate to the country for economic opportunities, not retirement. In Fresnoza-Flot’s article, a few Thai women visit a Thai Buddhist temple with their Belgian partners. These women’s behavior appears non-conventional, as Thai women generally frequent Thai Buddhist spaces in Belgium alone or with their younger children. Another non-conventional heterosexual union that our special issue identifies is highlighted in Lapanun’s article - *Isan* women in couple with Westerners who, through transnational marriage and migration, become landowners while living comfortably and supporting their natal family’s needs. These women, with their European partners and their natal families, do not fit the stereotype of being poor, as they constitute a new social class in rural places in Northeast Thailand, which makes the “village elites increasingly experience a decline or a perceived decline in their prominence and impact”. This social class dimension also appears salient among Thai migrant entrepreneurs and their British partners in Brighton in the United Kingdom (UK). Sunanta, in this issue, remarks that most Thai entrepreneurs in her study are women marriage migrants, who, like their Thai male counterparts, mobilize their ethnic and non-ethnic forms of capital. She demonstrates that these women are agentive individuals capable of incorporating themselves into their receiving country’s economy by capitalizing on the stereotypical “image of Thai-ness in the eyes of Westerners”, that is, “sensual, warm, gentle, and rich in touch and taste”. Her study counters the stereotypes portraying Thai women as economically dependent on their Western partners and the latter as non-supportive of Thai women’s entrepreneurial projects.

Aside from heterosexual, non-conventional unions, our special issue brings to the fore the intimate unions of *kathoe* with Western men. In Thongkrajai’s article, *kathoe* or “transgender male-to-female (MTF) persons” and their European partners in Europe fit the image of a heteronormative couple, unlike *kathoe*-Thai man unions. This can be attributed to *kathoe*’s gender and sexual strategies: “(b)eing feminine, appropriating feminine roles and providing accessible sexual fantasy”. Their European partners support their efforts of gender camouflage, making gender negotiations “a couple’s or even a family-in-law’s affair”. Unsurprisingly, many *kathoe* in Thailand aspire to be in a couple with a Western partner, as Scuzzarello and Statham

observe in their study. *Kathoey* seek long-lasting relationships with Western partners through whom they can affirm their gender identity, access social class mobility, and gain family acceptance. The enduring relationships with Western partners of interviewed *kathoey* in Scuzzarello and Statham's article call into question the stereotype of *kathoey*-Westerner unions as sex work or paid companionship.

The special issue papers above uncover the salient categories that intersect in the lives of non-conventional Thai-European couples: gender, social class, sexuality, age, and religion. Interestingly, the categories that shape social stereotypes of Thai-European marriages/partnerships in Europe-Thailand transnational spaces also provide possible ways to confront or navigate reductionist views about them. Indeed, by paying attention to intersecting categories in the lives of minoritized individuals (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005), we can grasp not only how their marginalization but also how possibilities to improve their situations are socially (re)produced (Gaspar et al., 2022; Milton & Qureshi, 2020).

Re-examining Mobility Assumptions

Two of the salient stereotypes circulating in Europe-Thailand transnational spaces suggest that migration from Thailand to Europe is a single pathway and that Thai migrants are economically poor. These stereotypes appear tightly linked to the question of mobility - "a *change* of condition" (Canzler et al., 2008) involving "affects, ideas, and discourses" (Fresnoza-Flot & Liu-Farrer, 2022, p. 3). Our special issue interrogates such mobility-linked stereotypes by considering the intersectionality of spatial movements, social class mobility, and/or intergenerational transmission.

Brown's article defies the assumption that migration is unidirectional from Thailand to Europe by focusing on the Netherlands-to-Thailand migration of Thai-Dutch couples. She shows that migration flows between the two countries are circular and shaped by Thai-Dutch couples' intersecting ageing, gender, and mobility capital. Thai-Dutch couples accumulate mobility as well as legal and social capital while residing in the Netherlands. They move to Thailand for overlapping reasons: the Dutch husband's (early) retirement as well as Thai women's gender role as wives and filial duty vis-à-vis their ageing parents. Interestingly, some couples wishing for the economic betterment of their lives are younger than socially expected and are not in their retirement age. Some lone Thai women returned to Thailand following conjugal separation or widowhood. In Thailand, these lone returnees and Thai-Dutch couples mobilize their accumulated capital, allowing them to be mobile translocally. Some of them decide at one point to move back to the Netherlands.

The question of mobility is also at the core of Lapanun's article in this special issue. Lapanun challenges the assumption that Thai women's transnational marriages do not affect stay-behind Thai men in rural areas. She remarks that men in *Isan* viewed their limited marriage possibilities as linked to their weak financial capacity compared to *farang* men who are socially considered economically capable of providing for the needs of village Thai women and their natal families. Hence, Thai men experience anxieties and social pressure alongside their awareness of the shift in local power relations in gender terms, as an increasing number of village Thai women marry *farang* men and access social class mobility.

This latter form of mobility constitutes the assumption that *kathoey* enter into a relationship with Westerners only for money. Scuzzarello and Statham's paper refute this assumption by focusing on *kathoey* in long-term relationships with *farang*. They bring to the fore *kathoey*'s deep-seated wish to be socially accepted in Thailand and enjoy an enduring union just like their heterosexual counterparts. Social acceptance of who they are appears here as a form of social class mobility, which becomes possible when they move to more open, tolerant local spaces with a *farang* partner. Likewise, Thongkrajai's article defies the assumption of economic and class mobility by unveiling the nuanced logic of *kathoey*'s migration to Europe in terms of social class: *kathoey* with a working-class background and low educational attainment migrate for economic needs, whereas their middle-class counterparts with high education achievement go to Europe in search of "a faithful relationship" and to build a family with a European partner who can accept them as they are. The articles by Scuzzarello and Statham and by Thongkrajai suggest that the intersecting categories of sexuality, gender, and social class influence *kathoey*'s translocal/transnational movements, their aspiration for long-lasting intimate unions with Europeans, their wish for social and legal acceptance, and in the case of those with a working-class background, their hope for upward social class mobility.

Another mobility assumption that this special issue puts into question is the view that Thais who moved to Europe become economically dependent on their European partners. Sunanta's article shows the contrary as she examines Thai migrant (wo) men's entrepreneurship in Brighton (UK). She demonstrates how Thai migrant women transform their cultural capital into a business advantage, that is, by capitalizing on their knowledge regarding "local customers' preference" and "attraction to the exotic notion of "Thai-ness"". By examining the case of self-employed Thai migrants, Sunanta challenges the generalizing stereotype that these migrants, notably women, are non-skilled, economically poor, and sex workers.

Finally, Fresnoza-Flot's article tests the assumption that mobility only concerns spatial and social class movements in Europe-Thailand transnational migration. Fresnoza-Flot illuminates nuances of mobility by analyzing Thai migrant women's religious practices that allow them to transform good deeds in the mundane world and transmit these to spiritual worlds in the form of merits. Mobility can also be observed in their transmission of religious beliefs, moral values, and a sense of Thai-ness to their children. Spatial mobility in Fresnoza-Flot's paper goes beyond the geographical movements of people, as material objects, symbols, and beliefs travel from one country to another within Europe and from Thailand to Europe. Salient intersecting categories that shape transmission dynamics are gender, social class, and (internal/global) ethnicity.

The challenged mobility assumptions discussed above constitute an important step to rethinking the reductionist views circulating in Europe-Thailand social spaces and shaping the lives of Thai migrants and their families. This step will not be complete without revisiting the social stereotypes related to the (re)productive labor of Thai (non-)migrants, an aspect that also intersects with their mobilities.

Unveiling (Re)productive Labor

From the feminist perspectives on transnationalism and globalization, Europe-Thailand transnational mobilities are gendered and driven by the globalization of

care work⁷ and reproduction⁸. Care is a gendered concept because care services are traditionally unpaid and given by women within the private household (England, 2005; Razavi, 2007, p. 70). Socially prescribed gender roles shape different expectations for women and men in care-giving and care-receiving situations in a particular society (Ngueyen et al., 2017; Serra-Mingot, 2020). More recently, care and reproduction have been viewed as becoming increasingly transnationalized. The global care chains (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004) and the international division of reproductive labour (Parreñas, 2005) highlight the commodification and global transfer of care/reproductive labor from the Global South to the Global North, most notably in the form of paid domestic work, but also professional care work in institutional settings (Yeates, 2012). Studying transnational families⁹, Baldassar and Merla (2014) proposed the concept of care circulation to trace the exchange and reciprocity of informal care that underlies family making and familial solidarity across distance and over time. Empirical studies in this special issue elucidate the forms of care and reproduction carried out by diverse transnational subjects that both challenge and reinforce traditional notions of care and global inequality.

In the non-traditional partnership between Western men and Thai *kathoeys* in Scuzzarello and Statham's and in Thongkrajai's articles, Thai *kathoeys* strive to perform and embody ideal Thai femininity. Conscious of their second-class woman status, the *kathoeys* put even greater efforts into adorning beautified feminine looks and taking great care of their Western partners' emotional, sexual, and personal needs. To their natal families in rural Thailand, Thai *kathoeys* in Scuzzarello and Statham's article share a similar sense of familial obligations to that of female *mia farang* in Lapanun's study. Partnership with Western men enables Thai *kathoeys* and *mia farang* from rural *Isan* backgrounds to provide care to their natal families in the forms of financial support and improved general well-being, enabling stay-behind family members to achieve higher social status in the sending community (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Statham, 2020).

Life course and age play an important role in Western-Thai partnerships and transnational mobilities. Empirical studies in this special issue involve older people, both Europeans and their Thai partners, who choose to spend extended time in Thailand in their old age. In Scuzzarello and Statham's article, Western men in advanced ages regularly visit and spend time with their much younger Thai *kathoeys* partners in Thailand. In Brown's paper, Thai women-Dutch men couples and divorced/widowed Thai marriage migrants relocate to Thailand after having spent years in the Netherlands. This trend suggests a global division of care and reproduction in which people choose to work and get paid in Europe but to retire and get old in Thailand, although there are exceptional cases (Brown, 2022, this issue). The large age gap between Western men and Thai women/*kathoeys* in both studies also suggests particular care exchange between partners, in which Western men provide

7 We understood "care work" in this special issue as "providing service to people that helps to develop their capabilities" (England, 2005, p. 383).

8 Reproduction encompasses processes involved in reproducing labor, physical human beings, and social identities while care work is a form of reproductive labor (Kofman, 2012).

9 The members of this family experience physical separation due to migration but maintain a sense of solidarity across nation-state borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

financial security in exchange for companionship and eldercare from Thai women/*kathoey*.

In Fresnoza-Flot's study, Buddhist social spaces facilitate the reproduction of ethnic and social class identities among Thai female marriage migrants and their children in Belgium. With an intention for their children to learn about their Thai roots, Thai migrant women bring their young children to Thai Buddhist temples in Belgium to participate in Thai language and arts lessons, cultural activities, and to meet other Thais. Apart from performing religious/spiritual functions, Thai temples in Belgium provide a space for intergenerational cultural transmission and migrant socialization during which people, objects, and food from Thailand create a Thai space outside of Thailand. Fresnoza-Flot notes that Thai migrant women are conscious of social class, ethno-regional, and the rural-urban divides among themselves and that these differentiations are performed and reproduced in the Thai Buddhist spaces in Belgium.

Studying Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in Brighton (UK), Sunanta found that Thai immigrant enterprises are concentrated in three sectors: food, massage, and cleaning. Providing services that feed, relax, and keep places clean, Thai immigrants take up paid reproductive work in a wealthier receiving society. In the Thai food and massage businesses, catering to mainstream British customers, Thai immigrant entrepreneurs capitalize on and thus reinforce the association of Thai-ness with being good at touch and taste. The paper challenges the stereotype of Thai migrants in Europe as exotic and economically dependent wives by focusing on their economic activities and entrepreneurial practices as well as internal diversity in terms of social class backgrounds, educational attainment, and migration pathways.

It is evident that various categories intersect in the lives of Thai informants in this special issue, which shapes their (re)productive labor, notably care-giving and care-receiving practices. Gender, social class, age, and family situation (married or divorced) particularly interact and reinforce in many cases traditional gender ideas of good natal family members, wives, partners, and citizens. The examples also challenge stereotypes by emphasizing the complexity and diversity of European – Thai partnerships that go beyond traditional family formation through heteronormative marriages. To challenge the exotic wives stereotype, the articles in this special issue shed light on the multifaceted lives of Thai wives in Europe, highlighting Thai migrant women's religious, economic, and community building practices both in the home and destination countries.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS FURTHER NUANCING OF EUROPE-THAILAND TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

This special issue underlines the importance of re-adjusting the scholarly lens on Europe-Thailand transnational migration to challenge simplistic and reductionist assumptions about Thai (non-)migrants, their partners, and other family members. This re-adjustment implies the adoption of an inclusive, mobility-focused, and (re)productive labor-sensitive approach with an intersectional orientation inspired by Crenshaw (1989) and McCall (2005). By doing so, our special issue offers new observations and identifies future research directions.

Revisiting the historical past of Europe-Thailand social, transnational spaces, this introductory paper outlines the larger context in which social stereotypes arise. We trace their origin in Thailand's encounters with the West, notably during the Cold War militarism and the boom of the country's (international) sex industry. Within Thailand, the stereotypical image of Thai women in couple with foreign men as poorly educated sex workers from lower social strata specifically concerns *Isan* women as they numerically dominate the country's sex industry. This stereotype is hence gendered, classed, and ethnicized locally. Across the empirical cases examined in this special issue, gender and social class are the most salient intersecting categories that affect the lives of Thai (non-)migrants and their families. These categories are particularly salient in the case of Thai (wo)men from *Isan* where women's transnational marriage has important repercussions on the lives of local men and on the elites in terms of social class (Lapanun, 2022, this issue). The two categories most often interact with age/ageing for heterosexual Thai migrant women (Brown, 2022, this issue) and sexuality for Thai transgender women (Thongkrajai, 2022, this issue; Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022, this issue). They also intersect with religion and ethnicity (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022, this issue), cultural capital (Sunanta, 2022, this issue), and mobility capital (Brown, 2022, this issue). The intersections of different categories reflect the diversity of social situations in which Thai (non-)migrants and their families live and the specificities of their respective receiving countries.

Moreover, this special issue nuances common-held understandings of migration and intimate unions within Europe-Thailand transnational spaces. First, we complexify the image of Thai-European marriages and partnerships by focusing on non-conventional unions, such as non-heteronormative, mobile, Thailand-based, and religion-oriented partnerships. Second, we bring to the fore different forms of mobilities (spatial, social class, and spiritual, among others) that Thai (non-)migrants experience or wish to attain through intimate unions and/or migration. Third, we show the links between paid and unpaid, as well as formal and informal forms of reproductive and care labor of Thai (non-)migrants, allowing us to challenge the binary representation of these individuals as either workers or spouses/partners of Western (wo)men. The examination of mechanisms of Othering at international and local levels represents the first step towards further nuancing Europe-Thailand transnational migration. Other ways of doing so are inherent in the future directions we wish to suggest, encompassing three possible themes. The first one points to the understudied phenomenon of Thai migrant contract workers, seasonal or non-seasonal, in specific economic sectors, for example, in the berry-picking and massage industries. The second theme focuses on the migration of students, business-persons, highly skilled individuals, and elites. The third theme worth exploring empirically is the role of religion and social media to understand Thai migrant women's self-representation through their own content creation in social media platforms. All three directions, if carried out, will provide varying voices and perspectives that can refute enduring stereotypes in Europe-Thailand transnational spaces.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

