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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 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. Articles outside the special issue focus address topics of community-based tourism in Brunei Darussalam and inclusive development in the context of a festival in Malaysia.

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

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

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INTRODUCTION

Thai migration to Europe[1] 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 *kathoey* (transgender women) (Pravattiyagul, 2021; Thongkrajai, 2012)

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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 translocal[2] 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, class[3], 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 Western[4] 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

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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 social[5] 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

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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) intercategorical 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

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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 (Phaoluangthong, 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 milieux 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 (*kathoey*) 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 nonsupportive of Thai women's entrepreneurial projects.

Aside from heterosexual, non-conventional unions, our special issue brings to the fore the intimate unions of *kathoey* with Western men. In Thongkrajai's article, *kathoey* or "transgender male-to-female (MTF) persons" and their European partners in Europe fit the image of a heteronormative couple, unlike *kathoey*-Thai man unions. This can be attributed to *kathoey*'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 *kathoey* 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 work[7] and reproduction[8]. 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 families[9], 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 *kathoey* in Scuzzarello and Statham's and in Thongkrajai's articles, Thai *kathoey* strive to perform and embody ideal Thai femininity. Conscious of their second-class woman status, the *kathoey* 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 *kathoey* 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 *kathoey* 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 *kathoey* 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/*kathoey* in both studies also suggests particular care exchange between partners, in which Western men provide

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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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Transnational Intimacies and Marriages: Gender and Social Class Complexities in two Northeastern Thai Villages

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Studies of transnational intimacies and marriages thus far reveal how these relationships are stimulated and constrained by global and local circumstances, cultures, ideas, and practices relating to gender, marriage, and family as well as class and ethnicity. This paper provides insights into the other side of the global process by exploring how these intimate relations generate tensions and challenge cultural ideas and practices regarding gender and social class at the 'local end' of the transnational connections. Drawing on three ethnographic studies in two northeastern Thai villages, my research argues that these marital relationships present a form of women's agency and bring new challenges to masculine identities and subjectivities that place local men in vulnerable positions. Women with Western partners also constitute a new class determined by both their consumption and their lifestyle – which set them apart from other villagers – and their increased ownership of both farm and residential land. Thus, these women form a new class in both Bourdieusian and Marxist senses, although land in this case has less to do with production but rather wellbeing, security, and prosperity. In this light, transnational marriages/intimacies induce the reconfiguring of gender and class in women's natal villages.

Keywords: Gender; Social Class; Thailand; Transnational Intimacy, Transnational Marriage

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, transnational intimacies and marriages have become more common in many Asian countries, yet intimate liaisons and marriages between people of different countries or ethnicities have a long history (Andaya, 1998). The investigations in the contexts of Southeast Asia reveal the dynamic perspectives in conceptualizing these relationships, moving from structural explanations – explaining these intimacies in relation to international politics/relations and trade, militarization, and transnational tourism (Cohen, 2003; Enloe, 2000) – toward agency approaches focusing on individual choices and agency (Brennan, 2004; Faier, 2009). This transformation also reflects the changing contexts in which such intimacies have been embedded (Lapanun,

2018). Interracial unions between people of French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies revealed, for example, the connections between sexuality, gender, and race with rules and politics of colonialism, which influenced individuals and their family lives (Stoler, 1992). In militarization contexts, sexual desires and interracial relations were stimulated through gender imaginations and fantasies regarding traditional roles of women as ideal wives and mothers who embraced traditional familial values (Constable, 2011). Others draw on the notion of *Orientalism* that has inspired the desires of transnational encounters and facilitated transnational tourism (Said, 1978). Asia is often depicted as a reflection of Western men's sexual fantasies; this representation has drawn Western male tourists to Asia to consume the eroticized Orient (Dahles, 2009; Manderson & Jolly, 1997).

Recent works have explored how these intimate relationships are stimulated and constrained by the global and local circumstances, cultures and practices relating to gender, marriage and family; as well as how women and men from different parts of the world have materialized their desire to meet and maintain the relationships (Constable, 2011; Ishii, 2016; Lapanun, 2019). Some studies explore encounters in the *contact zones* – either physical sites like the transnational tourist towns of Sosua in the Dominican Republic (Brennan, 2004) and Pattaya in Thailand (Garrick, 2005) or online spaces (Pananakhonsab, 2016) – where the transnational relationships were initiated and developed. Thus far, most studies on transnational intimacies discuss how these relationships are shaped by gender, class, local constraints and global opportunities and how women and men under these associations manage and negotiate their relationships (Cabezas, 2009; Cheng, 2010; Faier, 2009; Spanger, 2013). The present paper takes the opposite approach and discusses how transnational marriages between Thai women and Western men have affected and shaped gender power relations and class divisions in rural communities in Thailand where these intimacies are embedded. The discussions contribute to insights on the complexity and reconfiguration of gender relations and class divisions at the *local end* of the transnational connections generated by transnational marriages.

The paper draws on three research studies conducted during 2008-2018 in two Isan (Northeast Thailand) villages that are home to large numbers of *mia farang* (Thai wives of Western men). In exploring gender complexity, I focus on experiences of both Thai women and men who are either engaged in or are affected by transnational marriages as they live in the same *transnational social field* (Basch et al., 2003). I examine the shifts in gender power relations through discussing the discourse of a desired marriage partner constructed in the villages and local men's anxiety over being seen as unqualified marriage partners. It appears that gender dynamics are connected to the improved economic and social status of women in transnational marriages. Thus, I also discuss class complexity through exploring the increased ownership of land among *mia farang* and how it has complicated class division in the village. This analysis adds another layer to the existing studies on transnational marriage and class that have conceptualized class in relation to consumption and lifestyle (Lapanun, 2019; Sunanta, 2013). Overall, this paper highlights both gender and class complexities in relation to transnational marriages.

GENDER, CLASS, AND TRANSNATIONAL INTIMATE RELATIONS

Literature on transnational intimacies/marriages addresses gender and class in two different ways: first, the influences of gender/class on these intimate relationships and, second, the dynamics of gender/class resulting from these intimacies. These two-way relationships emphasize strong connections between these intimate relations with gender and class, which are discussed at length below.

The influences of gender/class on transnational intimate relationships

Studies in this group focus on how gender/class – apart from constraints at home, global opportunities and the restrictive state migration regimes – have shaped motivations, desires, and practices of women and men involved in or seeking transnational intimacies (Constable, 2011; Ishii, 2016; Statham et al., 2021). The images of women in Asia as being more traditional, embracing traditional familial values, and less modern than women in the West have motivated Western men to look for Asian spouses (Constable, 2011; Enloe, 2000). For Asian women, the gender norms of *dutiful daughter* and *good mother* as well as poverty at home and opportunities abroad are among the key factors encouraging them to engage in transnational marriages (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Bélanger et al., 2014; Cheng, 2010). These diverse motivations combine and constitute the *logics of desire*, shaping marriage choices and practices of women and men under transnational marriages (Lapanun, 2019).

Some researchers view these marriages in connection with the commodification of women's reproductive labor in which the brides depart from less-developed countries to sustain social reproduction in middle-class families and uphold economic competitiveness in wealthier societies (Lauser, 2008). In such contexts, women actively use different economic and socio-cultural situations across transnational space to redefine themselves and enhance opportunities for crafting their better future (Ishii, 2016; Lauser, 2008). In the binational unions between Filipino women and French men, for example, gender and class have shaped the way migrant Filipinas maintained transnational ties with their natal families. Gender norms in the Philippines compel women to support their parents and/or children; yet, this obligation is carried out in different ways. Women of modest social classes whose children from previous relationships were left under the care of their natal families feel obliged to conform to this obligation, whereas women of privileged classes neither feel compelled nor do they ask to do so (Fresnoza-Flot, 2017). The ways in which gender and class become the key elements shaping the *social location* of women, which in turn, influences their practices as well as social relations and ties to their natal families are elaborated in other studies (for example Butratana & Trupp, 2021).

Class background is also an important factor in coping with the negative stereotype of *mia farang*[1] living in the United States. Through the processes of *intraethnic othering*, the class-privileged *mia farang* distance themselves from less-privileged

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[1]   This negative stereotype drew on the associations between local women working in the sex and entertainment businesses and American servicemen that occurred during the Vietnam War. Such associations are reinforced by the routes some women take to enter transnational marriages, though the channels through which they make this transnational connection are quite varied.

ones. In such contexts, women's coping strategies present the intersection of class, gender, race, and ethnicity in deflecting the negative stereotypes, while at the same time perpetuating such stereotypes (Suppatkul, 2020). In addition, the relationships between young Thai women and older Western men living in Thailand reveal a form of negotiated exchanges through which women obtain significant material gains while experiencing pressure to adapt to their husbands' cultural needs. These women feel distant from their natal families emotionally, socially, and culturally, as they have experienced *imported assimilationism* (Statham, 2020). These studies show how gender, class, and race have shaped the lives of women and men under transnational intimate relationships.

In the destination countries where women live with their partners and where their gender and class backgrounds pressured them into a subordinated position, women turn love and the intimate dimensions of their relationships into a source of power for negotiation in daily lives. Filipina entertainer liaisons with U.S. soldiers in South Korea, for example, drew on the rhetoric of love in negotiating the stereotype of *victims of sex trafficking* and in constructing a better future (Cheng, 2010). Also, Filipina working in the hostess bars in rural Japan constructed and nourished new identities and gender subjectivities through performing *emotional labor* – a practice of affection, caretaking, and careful attention to convince male customers that they care for them. Whereas this practice is vulnerable to coercive labor conditions, it illuminates the agency exercised by these women (Parreñas, 2011), which enables them to craft their lives and selves both in Japan and the Philippines (Faier, 2009). Female Thai migrants working in the sex industry in Denmark also performed multiple subject positions as sex workers, wives, and female migrants. These women enacted and negotiated love by destabilizing binary categories of sex work and love. Love is articulated with emotions, money, gifts, care, and the notions of *the good husband* (Spanger, 2013). The women's experiences challenge the idea of clear boundaries between sex work and intimate relationships (Cabezas, 2009; Cohen, 1996). These studies highlight not only women's agency, but also how women's tactics and strategies in transnational contexts are predicated on ambivalent conditions.

The studies on men/masculinities and transnational marriages also present how gender has shaped these relationships even though the factors influencing these intimacies are diverse. Singaporean men who have married Vietnamese women are portrayed as *failures* in local marriage markets (Cheng, 2012). In negotiating such images, Singaporean men emphasize their role as providers for both their own and their wife's native family, which allows them to sustain their masculine subjectivity and validate their self-identity as *real men* (Cheng et al., 2014). Western men who settled with their Thai wives in Isan also perform *hegemonic masculinity* by conforming to the cultural ideals of breadwinning. Drawing on their provider roles and neocolonial imaginary, these men position themselves as *real white men*, a place-bound identity within Thailand that is subject to contradiction in the long term. Financial and social obstacles limit their ability to return home, except for those with ties to transnational capital (Maher & Lafferty, 2014). Another study reveals that retired Western men married to Thai wives enjoy their privilege by securing a *good* life in Thailand. These men practice a form of new-found masculinity and sexuality with their self-gratification and perception of being morally superior to local people

(Husa et al., 2014; Scuzzarello, 2020). Scholars also suggest that men's subjective experiences of masculinity are different from masculine identities, which are socially constructed, economically-politically facilitated, and culturally shared. The changing of subjective experiences of the individual (transient subjectivity) is not evidence of shifting masculine identities at a society level (Thompson et al., 2016). While most studies explored experiences of men engaged in transnational intimacies, this paper focuses on local men who are not engaged in, but are involved with or affected by such relationships.

The dynamics of gender/class resulting from transnational intimate relationships

Compared to the strand of literature discussed above, there is much less literature exploring the dynamics of gender/class by transnational intimacies even though studies on labor migration and its effects on gender alteration are substantial. Exploring marriages of Vietnamese women married to men from South Korea, Bélanger et al. (2014) reveal that such relationships led to the reconfiguration of gender power relations in women's natal families and communities. Remittances significantly increase women's status and power in their natal households. Though living overseas, these women are involved in family decision-making and control over the use of remittances. Transnational marriages also enhanced women's upward socio-economic mobility and bargaining power in local marriage markets. By contrast, these marriages resulted in negative changes for young men. Yet, it could be argued that women's strong commitment to their natal families manifested through regular remittances reproduce gender inequalities and women's subordination. Bélanger and her colleagues focus on women's involvement in decision making and control over resources as a source of power in altering gender relations. This paper explores the shift of gender power relations through the discourse of a desired marriage partner that has legitimated women's involvement in transnational marriage and led to masculine anxiety.

Changes in lifestyle, living conditions, and material possessions among women in transnational marriages and their natal families can be easily observed. Yet, *mia farang,* especially those from poor rural backgrounds, are perceived as *materialist women* in the Thai nationalist discourse of *immoral materialism* (Sunanta, 2013) or as *nouveaux riches* considering their highly visible forms of consumption (Lapanun, 2019). Despite the moral criticism, these authors point out that economic advancement and the more comfortable life these women enjoy impose tensions onto the existing class divisions in women's natal villages and convey a sense of unease for many in the urban, middle class. In this light, these studies reveal the dynamics of class in women's native societies resulting from transnational intimacies, ideally or virtually. Yet, class is conceptualized in relation to consumption practices and lifestyles, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). This paper approaches class by focussing on rights of land ownership. In Marxist analysis, class is defined in relation to ownership of means of production – land in this case (Wright, 2005). Thus, the paper discusses how the increased ownership of land among *mia farang* has complicated class divisions in the village, in addition to the distinctive lifestyles of *mia farang* that I argued in the earlier work (Lapanun, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper draws on three studies conducted in two rural Isan villages over a decade. In 2008-2009, I did extensive fieldwork in Na Dokmai village, Udon Thani province, that involved 86 informants: 25 men and 61 women (including 26 *mia farang* and 11 *farang*, foreign partners). This research explored experiences and negotiations of women under transnational marriage relations and it complicates conventional views about materiality and intimacy in these settings (Lapanun, 2019). In 2018, I again gathered data in Na Dokmai for a project exploring migration and women's land tenure rights and security, funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This study includes 50 respondents as representatives of their households, consisting of households of *mia farang*, international labor migrant households, domestic labor migrant households, and non-migrant households. In 2016-2017, I conducted research in Na Charoen village, Khon Kaen province to explore perceptions, experiences, and reactions of local men regarding the ongoing changes resulting from transnational marriages of village women. This study includes 25 informants, 13 males (age 20-63), and 12 females (age 23-57). All informants lived in the village during the fieldwork period; those who left the village for work and study were not included.

The studies on transnational marriages and local men's experiences in relation to such marriages employed the ethnographic approach of using interviews and observations as the major data collecting methods. Interviews were open but semi-structured in a way that allowed informants to recount their experiences, perceptions, daily lives and social relations. The migration and women's land rights research applied both surveys and interviews. The survey provides background information about the respondents' households and such quantified data as land holding size, land inheritance system, remittances, and consumption. Interviews were arranged to obtain in-depth information with some respondents and to make sense of data from the survey. Each study applied data triangulation by crisscrossing the interviews with different key informants along with secondary sources of information. Data analysis used the descriptive approach following the theoretical concepts applied in each study. In this paper, I focus on how transnational intimacies have complicated gender relations and class structure in women's natal villages.

RESEARCH SETTINGS

Na Dokmai and Na Cheroen are located in Udon Thani and Khon Kaen provinces – the top provinces in Northeast Thailand in terms of numbers of *mia farang*. Na Dokmai encompasses five *muban*[2] with a population of 3,539 (920 households). Na Charoen includes two *muban* with a population of 1,378 (298 households). The female-to-male ratio in both villages is nearly equal. 63% of residents in Na Dokmai and 50% of those in Na Charoen completed four to six years of schooling depending on their age.[3] These villages are relatively well-developed, though the infrastructure

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2   *Muban* is the smallest unit in the local administration system.

3   Most women older than 45 had four years of schooling while those younger had six years or more. Thailand applied a four-year compulsory education in the 1930s. This was raised to six years in 1977.

and house conditions in Na Dokmai are better than those of Na Charoen. In both communities, there are large, new houses designed in an urban-style architecture, distinctive from other houses. Such houses belong to women with *farang* husbands. Most households in these two villages are engaged in farming; some carry out non-farm activities. Yet, many families rely on remittances from children engaged in wage work elsewhere or daughters living overseas with their husbands. International labor migration in Na Dokmai is quite common, whereas residents of Na Charoen engage in domestic migration. From my observations, Na Dokmai is considered better than Na Charoen in terms of economic status and consumption power.

Transnational marriages in both villages came to a peak in the early 2000s, but the facilitating agents of this phenomenon are different. In Na Dokmai, the key agents were local schoolteachers who provided match-making services and a village man who ran a recruiting business, taking women to work at bars in Pattaya. In Na Charoen, interest in contacting Western men was facilitated by a village woman and her German husband who ran a match-making service that had facilitated transnational marriages of some women. In addition to this facilitating mechanism, women in both villages also materialized their desire to enter into transnational marriages through internet connections, networks of relatives and friends who are in such relationships as well as through working in the entertainment and sex industry.

CHALLENGING GENDER POWER RELATIONS: THE DISCOURSE OF DESIRED MARRIAGE PARTNER

Thus far, studies on the impacts of transnational marriage on gender relations explored women's involvement in decision-making and control over resources in the family and community contexts (Bélanger et al., 2014). Taking a different approach, this section discusses how the process by which women materialized their desire for transnational marriage has challenged gender power relations in the women's natal villages.

In 2008-2009, there were 159 women in Na Dokmai married to men from 21 countries. Of these men 81% were European and the rest were from the United States, Australia, and Asia. The majority of women had married local men before engaging in transnational unions; many of these women had children from that previous relationship. Marriage and family crises often came up in the life stories of *mia farang* as a part of the complex set of factors motivating them to seek connections with foreign men. Nisa (33),[4] a divorced mother who lives with her Danish partner answered my question, what kind of man she was looking for:

> I want a good man who is generous and warm-hearted, who is responsible for his family, accepts and supports my children and cares for my parents as well. My previous relationship [with a local man] taught me how life would be if the man doesn't take his family seriously (also cited in: Lapanun, 2019, p. 82).

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4   The figure after a person's name indicates her/his age at the time of the interviews. I first met Nisa on 16 February 2008 at her house in Na Dokmai and interviewed her several times from February to May 2008.

Nisa's answer is based on her experience with her Thai ex-partner whom she lived with while working in Bangkok. With a vocational education, Nisa headed to Bangkok and worked at a textile factory; there she met a mechanic, the father of her daughter who she had lived with for five years until she found out that he was seeing another woman. While she became pregnant, he did not take care of her, thus she left him and her job and returned to the village to live with her parents. Nisa struggled and brought up her daughter without any support from her partner. He failed to fulfil the role of family provider, and his promiscuity was intolerable to her. Nisa's account of having a partner while being away from home and going through a difficult time in her marriage and eventually breaking up was shared by many village women[5]. Some women blamed their marital crises on their husbands' gambling and alcohol addictions. More often than not, the women have to raise their children without support from the father. These women's experiences conveyed an image of *irresponsible* local men who do not take their family seriously. It is this image that the discourse of desired marriage partner has drawn and rooted in the minds of local people. This discourse highlights characteristics of a desirable marriage partner who is a reliable provider and good family man who allows a woman to fulfil filial obligations as a dutiful daughter through supporting their parents. Such characteristics imply a dismissal of local men as unfit, therefore legitimating women's engagement in transnational intimacy.

The discourse of a desired marriage partner is a powerful one. It has motivated both women who directly experienced marriage crises and young single women to opt for marrying Western partners. In addition, it has also stimulated women's parents to manage and support their daughters to engage in transnational marriage. Bua (58), a woman in Na Dokmai, is a case in point; she searched for a match-making agent and paid THB 120,000 (USD 4,000) to get Nuan (34), her divorced daughter with a son, to marry a German man. Nuan separated from her ex-husband who had been seeing another woman. The man wanted to maintain relationships with both women, but Nuan could not accept this idea and ended the relationship. Bua believed that if her daughter married a Thai man, she would face family problems and suffer again. Then, Bua persuaded Nuan to marry a *farang* man, hoping for a better future for her daughter and grandson. Bua was successful, as Nuan departed for Germany in 2003 and now lives there with her husband. Having a job with regular income, Nuan managed for her son to join her in Germany, and she also conformed with female filial obligations by sending remittances to her parents regularly.

Drawing on this discourse, some village women took the route of connecting with Western men by engaging in the entertainment and sex industry, especially in transnational tourist destinations. While this practice is stigmatized, it allows women to materialize their desire to opt for transnational marriage and to manage their own lives, as I discussed in detail with examples in my book (Lapanun, 2019). These women's practices reveal their agency and highlight the dynamic of gender power relations, which at the same time put local men in a vulnerable position.

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5   In the study, I interviewed 26 *mia farang*; more than half of them related accounts similar to that of Nisa.

MASCULINE ANXIETIES AND PRACTICES

Local men's experiences of anxiety from being seen as unsuitable marriage partners is another aspect of the dynamic of gender power relations in the villages. Although these men did not engage in transnational marriages, they were affected by such relationships. In exploring masculinity, the cultural ideal of breadwinner/provider has served as the key concept. Breadwinning is a practice that arises from specific gender relations and is enmeshed in historical processes and economic structures. It "serves as a powerful ideological device in forming individuals' self-identity and in producing and reproducing gender behavior and activities in everyday life" (Zuo, 2004, p. 814). The breadwinner concept emerged in industrial societies with a clear division of tasks between men and women regarding production and reproduction. This gender division of labor is common in Isan agrarian and matrilocal society where men, after marriage, move into the house of their wife's parents and take responsibility in household production, although women also engage in production activities while they take major roles in reproduction work (Lapanun, 2019; Mills, 1999). This practice represents men's breadwinner role, though it is not the man alone who provides economic support to his family.

Breadwinning roles are central to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity embodied the "most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity can be constructed in specific social contexts and may not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men, but this cultural ideal expresses desires and fantasies that men, in all societies, have negotiated and articulated in sustaining their masculine identity (Connell, 1995). Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity concept is criticized for its Eurocentric tendency, and its singularity, homogeneity, and inability to incorporate other hegemonic forms of masculinity. Thus, some scholars reject this concept (Osella & Osella, 2006). Others do not dismiss it but seek to elaborate and expand the analysis of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, overall, this concept is extremely influential in studying men and masculinities (Ford & Lyons, 2012). My work reveals that it is the breadwinning ideal that village men have articulated and negotiated, yet it is not the sole factor contributing to women's motivation to seek transnational marriage.

In real life, breadwinning is complex and often intertwined with *masculine culture* practices that are reinforced through gender cultures and norms in Thai society including such activities as drinking alcohol, getting together, visiting entertainment sites, gambling, and seeking out sexual experiences and prostitutes. Kitiarsa's study (2008) provides a good example of breadwinning roles entangled with the practices of masculine culture in the daily life of Thai migrants in Singapore. Thai migrant workers – many of whom are Isan villagers – engaged in sexual encounters as a strategic way of negotiating their intimate identity and subjectivity in their transient life away from home. Such sexual acts are a major part of temporary life in a foreign land. My data from Na Dokmai show that many village men who left their wives and children behind at home could or would not fulfil their provider responsibility, leaving the wives to take on the household burden alone. Experiencing stress

and loneliness in overseas countries, some men spent their earnings for their own pleasure; others became involved in relationships with other women. Situations like these tend to paint local men as irresponsible family heads. In addition, the narratives of women in the studied villages repeatedly reveal involvement of local men in gambling, drinking alcohol, and promiscuity. Other studies also disclose such local behaviors (Jongwiliawan & Thompson, 2013; Ten Brummelhuis, 1994). These stories have reinforced the image of irresponsible local men who do not care for their family. Drawing on my fieldwork in Na Charoen, I discuss local men's anxieties and how they have articulated and negotiated the on-going changes resulting from the transnational marriages.

During my fieldwork in Na Charoen, I often saw groups of young men getting together in front of a game shop that also sells drinks and snacks. These men were in their twenties and early thirties. In the afternoon of 9 May 2016, I joined the group of five young men: two daily wage laborers, a laid-off man, a high school student and Dan (29), the owner of the game shop. The conversations reflected the experiences and stresses of these men in relation to opportunities and constraints in their lives. Tom (25), a daily wage worker, recounted that he neither has a regular job nor earns enough to make ends meet. It is difficult to get a job with good pay for those like him and his friends who have only limited education and work experience. He had a job only when his employer needed more labor and he earned a minimum daily wage. However, Tom and his friends met at Dan's shop almost every day; they chatted, drank and sometimes went to restaurants or cafés in town. Tom said, "it's good to meet and talk to friends who are in a similar situation [insecure/no job]."

Like Tom, young village men often talked about their experiences of having no or insecure jobs and their practice of going out, seeking thrills and drinking, which they considered common as it is a part of *masculine culture* even though they were aware that such behavior would make them unqualified as potential marriage partners. These young men's perceptions and experiences are different from those of older men in their fifties and sixties, who engaged in agriculture, or non-agricultural paid labor in the neighborhoods and urban centers to fulfil breadwinner responsibilities. Realizing the differences between their generation and later ones, the older village men did not appreciate the young men's financial irresponsibility, involvement in gambling, and propensity to overindulge in alcohol[6].

Dan, the owner of the game shop who had also struggled to embrace his breadwinner role in the past, agreed that such young men images are common in Na Charoen. He admitted that he had engaged in *masculine culture* activities in his teenage life. Dan is from a relatively well-to-do family and after marriage he sold his car and motorbike to invest in a game shop that has generated enough income to support his wife and son. Dan said,

> My life changed totally; now I have a different lifestyle than most of young men
> in the village who enjoy going out, drinking, gambling, and philandering. They
> think that nothing is wrong, these are men's things, they just enjoy life... Finding
> a job is difficult; running a business is not easy and involves risk of failure;

6   The experiences and opinions of village men of different generations regarding transnational marriage are discussed in further detail elsewhere (Lapanun & Thompson, 2018b).

> farming is hard work. Young men don't want to think about these things as they make them feel stressed. I understand them; in the past I thought the same and I did enjoy going out with friends very much... I changed, if I hadn't, I would not have a future; my wife and my son would have no future neither[7].

Dan was aware of the breadwinner ideal and embraced it. He changed his lifestyle. Other young men, like Tom and other friends, often cited the limited economic opportunities as the root of their inability to make ends meet and embrace breadwinner masculinity, thereby limiting their possibilities of marriage. These men claimed that *masculine culture* practices provide them a space in coping with the anxieties stemming from limited economic opportunities, which make them seen as unsuitable partners. For these local men, it is hard to compete with the greater financial capital that *farang* men tend to be able to provide. Interestingly, while men related their limited marriage possibilities to financial responsibility, women and their parents, like Nisa, Bua, and others in Na Charoen, considered practices like promiscuity, hard drinking, and gambling as criteria for not choosing a partner, apart from economic dimensions.

Indeed, local men are aware of the shift in gender power relations and their vulnerable position posed by transnational marriage. Frequently, this awareness results in anxieties and profound pressure. However, most village men cannot change their practices. The disjuncture between anxiety – resulting from the emergence of *mia farang* as a new social class and its implications for gender power relations – and action shares with Zuo's suggestion that the alteration of breadwinner ideology does not necessarily lead to behavioral changes. Zuo relates this disconnection to the contradictions between egalitarian beliefs and non-egalitarian behavior (Zuo, 2004). In an earlier work, my colleague and I (Lapanun & Thompson, 2018a) also argue that the discontinuations between the awareness and practices as manifested in Na Charoen have evolved around the dissonance between breadwinner roles and the '*praise-orientation*' status of men in matrilineal society, which is different from the '*status-oriented*' masculinity in patrilineal society (Bao, 1998). This disconnection underlines masculine practices and identities that Isan men have had to articulate and negotiate. This on-going process contributes to the dynamic of gender power relations in Isan villages.

CLASS COMPLEXITY

I argued elsewhere that *mia farang* make up a new 'class' determined by their consumption patterns (Lapanun, 2019), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Here I further discuss the issue of class through exploring women's land ownership. Thus, this section conceptualizes class in both Bourdieuian and Marxist senses.

In Na Dokmai and Na Charoen lifestyles and consumption patterns, symbolizing middle-class ideals are amply manifested in the living standards of *mia farang*

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7   I met Dan on 9 May 2016 at his house in Na Charoen and we had a few conversations during May - June 2016.

and their families. These women own new, urban-style houses; some regularly go to town for shopping and dining. They also travel to different tourist destinations in Thailand and overseas. Their houses are equipped with expensive furniture, a living room with a sofa set, and a modern kitchen with a dining-table set. However, such furniture and spaces were rarely used. One woman said that the dining table and modern kitchen were used by her husband during his stay. She usually cooked in an old kitchen outside the house. Such enhanced material consumption is oftentimes perceived as conspicuous consumption. For Bourdieu, consumption as the manifestation of taste is a cultural and symbolic marker for class; he noted:

> [Taste] functions as a sort of social orientation, a 'sense of one's place', guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466).

Following Bourdieu's analysis, urban-style houses, luxurious furniture, and distinctive lifestyles serve to indicate the status of the women and their households and symbolize the distinction from other families. Thus, such consumption constitutes an index of class mobility[8] (Lapanun, 2019).

Apart from examining class in relation to consumption, data from FAO research reveals how transnational marriages enable women to acquire land and secure women's rights over land. The data in Table 1 present patterns of remittance use of three types of households: households with women under transnational marriage (TMH), households with international labor migrant (IMH), and households with domestic labor migrant (DMH). For all households, remittances were an important source of daily expense. About half of TMH and IMH were able to purchase land and only 15% of DMH earned enough to buy land. Interestingly, the number of TMH invested in building/renovating houses is more than twice higher than those of IMH and DMH. There are also such expenses as buying a car or fertilizer, and paying debt, which DMH could not afford due to their relatively lower earnings.

	TMH (11 households)	IMH (13 households)	DMH (13 households)
Daily expense	11 (100%)	13 (100%)	13 (100%)
Buying farm land	**6 (55%)**	**7 (53%)**	**2 (15%)**
Building/renovating houses	**8 (72%)**	**3 (23%)**	**4 (31%)**
Buying a motorbike	10 (91%)	11 (85%)	2 (15%)
Buying a car	7 (63%)	8 (61%)	0
Buying fertilizer	0	4 (31 %)	0
Repaying debt	2 (18%)	4 (31 %)	0

Table 1. Patterns of remittance use

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8   For more in-depth analysis on this emerging new class and its consequence on the village hierarchical structure, please see Lapanun (2019).

Despite the limited samples, the in-depth interviews elaborate the data in Table 1. In Na Dokmai, it is common and the foremost choice for TMH to build/renovate houses; *mia farang* explained that they wanted to improve the living conditions of their natal families. Some planned to resettle in the village after retirement; thus they invested in a house for their future. Moreover, new, urban-style houses are a symbol of 'being successful' and an important marker in claiming social status and prestige.

The interviews with women in Na Dokmai also elaborate the connections between transnational marriage and land acquisition; Pang and Amphai's sister are cases in point. Pang (53), a woman selling cooked foods and drinks who has lived with a Belgian man, recounted that her partner invested in building a two-story house where they have lived and where Pang has operated her food trade. Pang acquired the piece of land where the house was built by her late partner, an English man who was relatively well-off. He bought three pieces of residential land in the village and a house where Pang's son (from a local father) and his family live. Without support from her partners, it would not have been possible for Pang to own land and houses as she was born to a poor, landless family. Also, Amphai (51), the sister of two women married to German husbands who resettled in Germany, recounted that a few years after marriage, one of her sisters purchased a 10 rai of sugarcane field[9]; later she also bought a 10 rai of rubber plot where Ampai's and her family has lived. The sister and her German partner have visited Na Dokmai regularly, but they have not yet decided whether they will return and resettle in Thailand after retirement. Yet, in 2017 she bought an eight rai of paddy field. Amphai and her family work on her sister's land, and income is shared between the two sisters. With an uncertain future, Amphai does not know why her sister kept buying land. Due to the fact that the perception of land as capital ensuring future security and prosperity was prevalent in Na Dokmai, it is possible that Amphai's sister had bought land based on this idea.

Boon's family presents a successful migrant household able to acquire land from remittances. Boon (59), a village headman with two grown-up sons, recounted that his older son had worked in Israel for five years (2005-2010). After paying for the migration contract, Boon and his wife managed to buy a five rai of paddy field from his remittances with a portion of the parents' savings. Boon put his son's name on the land document as a large portion of the money was from him. His younger, divorced son with two children has worked in Korea for two years. He regularly sends money to care for his daughter and son left in the village under the care of Boon and his wife. Boon's wife, who managed family resources, wanted to save remittances from her younger son for education of his children, instead of buying land as she planned to give a portion of her farmland to him.

Overseas labor migration, like transnational marriage, allows successful migrants to acquire land. Yet, these two types of migration present different patterns of gender corresponding to land ownership. In transnational marriage cases, women's names were put on the land documents; thus the women are the legal owners of the land. By law, foreigners are not allowed to own land in Thailand. Foreign men can purchase and build a house in cooperation with their spouses, but the property has to be in the women's family name. This signifies legal rights of women over the property. But in

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9   1 acre = 2.5 rai

most labor migration cases, male names are on land documents, as men are the ones who earned income and dominated overseas migration, although women are also involved in these activities. If remittances are from women, their names are on the documents. Having one's name on land documents not only secures one's legal rights over land, but it is also a source of social power for women that allows them to be relatively independent of their *farang* partners in case of failed marriages.

One may ask why *mia farangs* are more advantaged than women (and men) engaged in international labor migration. To answer this question, it is important to note that, although labor migration and marriage migration are a part of the same global processes, the social relations that women as wives and workers encounter are different. Migrant wives have been supported by their husbands, economically and socially, both during migration processes and while living in the destination countries. Most *mai farang* received financial support from their husband for traveling, housing and living costs, apart from other benefits. By contrast, male and female labor migrants have to take care of all migration costs themselves. Migrant workers often struggle with high costs of migration contracts, international travel and brokerage in some cases. Such differences relate to the social relations that *mia farang* and migrant workers have been involved in, which have affected their lives and ability to own land.

In any case, the complex ways in which types of migration, gender and land ownership are related reveal that transnational marriages allow women to own land and women's land rights are secure. In a Marxist sense, holding more land means increased ownership of means of production. However, land in this case has less to do with productive relations as in Marxist analysis; rather it ensures future security, prosperity, and women's status. For Bourdieu, land as economic capital can be converted to cultural capital, and it influences consumption patterns. In this light, women with Western husbands make up a new class in both a Bourdieusian and a Marxist sense as these women do not solely change their consumption patterns (Lapanun, 2019), but also own more land – a means of production – although how their land is actually producing added value needs further investigation. The dynamics of land ownership and consumption contribute to the emergence of *mia farang* as a new social class. This development has imposed tensions on the existing class divisions in the village, causing the village elites to increasingly experience a decline or a perceived decline in their prominence and impact.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of how transnational marriages/intimacies shape gender and class at the "local end" of these transnational connections demonstrates the dynamics of gender power relations and the emergence of a new class defined by both an increase in land ownership and distinct consumption patterns. In fact, the complexity of class resulting from transnational marriages, its influence on the existing class structure in rural villages and the alarm it instills in the urban, middle-class are documented (Lapanun, 2019; Sunanta, 2013). Conceptualizing class in relation to land ownership rights, this paper shows that transnational marriages allow *mia farang* to acquire land, thereby generating even more tension within the village and in Thai society in

general. This on-going change is a part of a social transformation that Thai people have to deal with. Apart from class complexities, transnational marriages can be a powerful element in altering gender power relations in the women's natal communities. Yet, living in intimate proximity with a foreign partner can create psychological stress for women as they face pressure to accommodate their husbands' cultural needs (Statham, 2020). Gender relations in the contexts of these unions become more complex when considering local men's experiences. While local men are aware of the shift in gender power relations, their practices of *masculine culture* and their incompetence in embracing breadwinner roles reproduce patriarchal gender privilege.

One may wonder whether these marriages are a liberating choice for *mia farang*. The answer may not be simple; we need to look at how gender, class, and race intersect and influence life choices and practices of women and men in specific contexts of their lives. As important as such intersections are, the phenomenon has to be explored in ways that do not lose sight of how women and men in these relationships make sense of their lives on their own terms.

I have demonstrated that focusing on gender and class dynamics resulting from transnational marriages allows us to better understand subtle and profound changes that such relationships have on local communities apart from material improvements. Since this paper draws on studies conducted before the Covid pandemic, the questions of how the pandemic shaped these transnational relationships as well as gender and class complexities could be the focal point of future studies.

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DISCLOSURE

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Femininity in Transition: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality Experiences of Thai Transgender Migrants in Europe

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Many queer foreigners perceive Thailand as a gay paradise. They have an image of the country as having a tolerant attitude towards LGBTIQ+. However, for Thai LGBTIQ+, Western countries evoke wealth, progress, and acceptance where people with a different gender identity or sexual orientation can fully enjoy their rights. Thai LGBTIQ+, like men and women, strive to go abroad seeking a life they dream of. This article aims to give an account of one of these marginalized groups' experience that is often neglected by both Thai and Western transnational scholars. Based on an ethnographic study in four European countries with 26 Thai transgender informants, this article argues that migration needs to be considered as a search for one's well-being, not only in terms of economic aspects, but also in terms of sentimental or emotional needs – that is, the possibility of living their gender and being socially and legally accepted. In this transcultural context, not only do people move across borders, but they also export with them perceptions and understandings about sex, gender, and sexuality from their home country. These aspects are renegotiated and rearticulated in the new socio-cultural milieu of the host countries in order to maximize these new conditions for their own interest. They may or may not reveal their transgender identity, depending on contexts, social interactions, and whom they are dealing with. Their transgender identity can offer them advantages, particularly in the realm of sex.

Keywords: Kathoey and Migration; Queer Migration; Sexual Migration; Thai Migration in Europe; Thai Transgender

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INTRODUCTION

According to Thai social representation, Western countries evoke visions of wealth, development, and modernity (Kitiarsa, 2010). Going abroad becomes one of the ultimate goals for many Thai people, men, women, and *kathoeys* – or Thai transgender male-to-female (MTF) persons – as well. *Kathoeys* strive to go abroad where, they believe, people with a non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation can fully enjoy their rights and regain social recognition (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 85). This image of Western countries has been

maintained and reactivated constantly throughout many mythical and fairy-tale-like stories disseminated by the media as well as by word of mouth among peers, families, and communities. This kind of image still nourishes the Thai imagery of Western countries and their desire to look for possibilities to migrate (Lapanun, 2019, p. 14-15).

For many decades, Thai-Western transcultural studies (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Cohen, 2003; Sunanta & Angeles, 2013) have been dominated by the theme of *mia farang*, literally Thai wives, transcultural marriages and relationships between Thai women and Western partners. These studies had contributed greatly in terms of theoretical perspective changes and understanding of transnational intimacy in an era of globalization. Yet, the non-heteronormative population had never been integrated in this mainstream thought. This article is part of the pioneer studies that investigated Thai Queer migration in the European-Thai transnational and transcultural context (see also Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022, this issue), with the aim of challenging these common stereotypes and taking into account experiences of those who were left behind.[1]

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, migration policy was restricted and more regulated in many Western countries. At the same time, many European states had started to legalize same-sex marriage or introduced civil partnership laws, which opened up more possibilities to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, intersexual, queer + (LGBTIQ+) population to migrate via their union with a European partner. The Netherlands legalized same-sex partnership in 1998, and same-sex marriage in 2001 (Steenhof & Harmsen, n.d.). In France, le Pacs (*Pacte civil de solidarité*) was voted for in 1999, and marriage for all in 2013 (Borrillo, 2017). In Germany, *Eingetragene Lebenspartnerschaft* was legalized in 2001 and same-sex marriage in 2017 (Lauderback, 2018). Thailand still does not have any legal recognition for LGBTIQ+ rights despite its appearance as an LGBTIQ+ friendly country. Consequently, migration via marriage union has become a new way to migrate favored by the new generation of migrants who are looking for "love" and "rights" (Thongkrajai, 2014, p. 83). This anthropological research was conducted in four European countries: France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Switzerland. It aimed to give an account of Thai *kathoey* migrants' conditions of adaption and settlement. Drawn from interviews, participant observations, and ethnographic fieldnotes, this study considered a *kathoey*'s migration processes as a search for well-being and a life that they long for, not only for achieving their economic goals, but also to fulfill sentimental and emotional needs, such as the possibilities of living as a woman, having a relationship with a partner, or changing their legal status. *Kathoey* migrants utilized different strategies, such as identity camouflage or mobilizing their potential gendered and sexual resources in their new social environment, in order to fulfill their quest for "a better life". This article will address, firstly, some essential literature that had contributed to construct the conceptual framework and the scope of the study. Then, it will describe methodology and key informants' profiles. It will present, thirdly, the research findings according to three themes: motivation, femininity in migration, and gender negotiation in intimacy. And, lastly, it will conclude relevant points and discuss future trends of related issues.

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1   This study is based on the author's PhD. research and the fieldwork took place during 2008 – 2011. This PhD research was under the supervision of Professor Laurence HÉRAULT, Institut d'ethnologie méditerranéenne, européenne et comparative. Aix-Marseille University, France.

REVISITING THAI QUEER IN TRANSNATIONAL/CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The definition of the term *kathoey* posed some research challenges in a transnational context as it can be interpreted in different ways and refer to many groups of people or sexual/gender identities. According to Matzner (2001), *kathoey* does not only mean MTF transgender. In everyday use, the word can be used to refer to a gay man or an effeminate man, depending on contexts.

This multiplicity and interchangeability of the term raised the question how to identify *kathoey* and limit the scope of research, resulting in an explorative phase in fieldwork, as well as in literature. The researcher began with interviewing five people who were born male and identified as *kathoey*: two who had a masculine appearance with an effeminate manner, two who cross-dressed sometimes, and one who lived as a female and had already had sex reassignment surgery. Those who had a feminine appearance and always cross-dressed mentioned difficulties on how they were perceived and treated socially as female in a European context, but drastically placed in a vulnerable position when their legal identity as 'male' had to be verified (e.g., in the situation of passport control). Their masculine-looking counterparts who did not undertake the transition did not seem to have the same problem. In fact, many studies have shown that Thai male-to-female transgenders must face much discrimination due to their cross-gendered characteristics and the mismatch between their gender performance and legal status in everyday life. Many failed to get a decent job despite their qualifications due to the lack of legal gender recognition (Suriyasarn, 2014). Social and legal discrimination as well as sexism in the homeland are push factors for their migration (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 99). Focusing on this particularity and due to the lack of existing research, this research focused only on those *kathoey* who were discriminated as *sao praphet song* (second-class women), who had feminine appearance regardless of whether or not they had already undergone sex reassignment surgery, but who were still considered as male in the eye of the law.

Such fluidity of the *kathoey* category finds its origin in the Thai conception of sex and gender or *phet*. Morris (1994) affirms that the Thai *phet* was a ternary system rather than a binary of male and female, in which *kathoey* constitutes an intermediary element between femininity and masculinity. *Kathoeys* can go back and forth between these two polarizations and readapt their gender performances and social roles in order to live socially integrated in different social spheres (Thongkrajai, 2010, p. 170). The malleability of *kathoey* identity shows the contextual sensitivity of *phet*; as Van Esterik (2000) summarizes, the Thai conception of "gender is best theorized as a context sensitive process, constructed through interactions with others. Gender surfaces are carefully and aesthetically presented in public to communicate how one expects to be treated" (p. 203). Rather than being static or fixed, the Thai notion of gender identity is body-based and constructed through what Butler (1990) called *a styled repetition of acts*, which must be understood as a series of performative and interactive acts: "bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 140). Such performative self-display, by which a sense of being is generated, can only make sense in social interaction with other actors as it is a means through which to enter the social world. Regardless of being a man, a woman, or a *kathoey*, it is necessary that one is socially recognized as such (Thongkrajai, 2010).

However, interestingly, such gender fluidity and performance seemed not to bother *kathoey* migrants as much as they were concerned about how to survive their migration experience. Queer migration has invited us to take a deeper look at transnational migrations with a *queer* lens. From this view, not only do people move across the border, but they also transport with them conceptions about identities, sex, gender, and sexuality from their origins and relocate them in the new social settings. Such translocation implies not only movements across different levels of geographic space, but also the back-and-forth relationships and negotiations within the local and the global forces in readjustments of embodied identity, sexuality, and desire of queer lives (Carrillo, 2017, pp. 23-24). In such a framework, *kathoey* migrants lived, moved, and navigated within two or more different social settings where hetero- and cis-normative regimes, or the structure of power and ideologies where heterosexuality and cisgenderism[2] are privileged, as well as other social and sexual politics from both the society of origin and societies of settlement can interweave simultaneously. *Gendered geography of power* (Mahler & Pessar, 2001), intertwining with hetero- and cis-normativity and hierarchies, forces migrants to readjust, adapt, and renegotiate themselves and may create a possibility of escaping, renegotiating, or empowering as well as relocating them in subordination situations. This research is situated in this research line of the *co-presence* (Diminescu, 2002; Nedelcu, 2010), an interconnection between the host country and the home country where multiple and transcultural regimes of sex, gender, and sexuality can interplay and shape the migration process and vice versa. *Sexual migration* points out that migration can be aligned with a coming out process for those who identify themselves as LGBTIQ or non-normative minority groups. According to Hector Carrillo (2004) sexual migration is:

> International migration that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate, including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights. (p. 59)

However, the passage from a developing country such as Thailand to developed countries in Europe should not be understood, somewhat mistakenly, as a passage from tradition to progression or from oppression to liberation without grasping all the nuances. Carrillo (2017, p. 5) reminded us in his recent work to go beyond a common assumption that such transnational movement is an attempt to escape an oppressive world in the Global South towards a sexual freedom space in the Global North. Manalansan's (2005) work disclosed how Filipino gay migrants in New York

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2   Cisgenderism can be defined as an ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes non-normative gender identities that do not align with assigned sex and gender at birth as well as those behaviors and gender expressions that do not conform to the binary system of masculinity and femininity. Cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and other non-normative expression. Individuals who do not conform to the cisgender regime are seen as deviant, abnormal, immoral, and even threatening. They can face gender-bias prejudice, discrimination, and even violence (Lennon & Mistler, 2014).

had to identify themselves as *bakla*, a Tagalog term that connotes cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, transgenderism, and homosexuality, to survive their exclusion from the mainstream American gay scene. Recuperation of such homeland-rooted identity "became a tool to negotiate [one's] cultural discomfort" (Manalansan, 2005, p. 156) when facing the intersecting gender, sexual, and racial regimes in the new social setting of migration and resulting in a daily bricolage of identities, bodily performances, and negotiations.

In *mia-farang* studies, the roles of gender and sexuality were also brought to light. For example, the works of Lapanan (2019) and Suksomboon (2011) show how sexual fantasies and gender stereotypes of both Thai women and Western men shape Thai women's decision, by engaging in sexscape and romantic encounters with Western men, to look for the opportunity to marry and enter transnational migration. The image of sweet, submissive, traditional as well as exotic and sexually desirable Asian women push European men as well to look for Asian/Thai female partners who can fulfill these roles better than Western women (Lapanan, 2019; Suksomboon, 2011). In return, Thai women as well as *kathoey* migrants make use of these stereotypes of a 'good woman' to maintain and stabilize their relationships with Western men and ensure their survival in migration. Such practice reflects their margin of power to carefully manipulate their sexuality, gendered self and sexual roles, and finally their agency in order to survive and succeed in their migrations (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 97).

Situated in these directions, this study takes into account the various roles of sex, gender sexuality, and their imbrications in the migration process. The objective is to take into consideration cultural-specific elements in both the host societies and homeland context with the aim to bring to light such fluidity of the *kathoeys'* gender and sexuality, and to show how hetero, and cis-normativity in *co-presence* were understood and reflected socially in practices and in the negotiation processes of *kathoey* migrants. Considering the *kathoeys'* migration as *a quest for self* or for well-being, this must be understood as an intertwined combination of economic, social, emotional, and sexual-driven processes to attain a state of well-being and a life that they long for. The *kathoeys'* migration may not exactly be about coming out of the closet but rather about finding the way to fit in or conform their femininity *translocally in transition* and being fully recognized as a woman of the 'first class world'. As Brummelhuis (1999) explained:

> *Kathoeys* show pride when acquiring a foreign passport that describes them as 'female'. Lek explained that it was her ambition to get a Danish Passport, and she gave an intriguing explanation, 'It has higher percentage' [i.e., status] (*mi persen mak kwa*). She then would not need a visa to travel to Italy or France, which she wanted to visit because she 'liked old things'. It is fascinating to observe how in her case the reality of changing gender went together with the expectation of becoming a higher-class world citizen. (p. 133)

This article will attempt to answer the following question: How do *kathoey* migrants make use of their transgender identity, an embodied self with such gender and sexual fluidity in between femininity and masculinity, and put into practice different strategies of negotiation to achieve their *quest for self* in migration?

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using qualitative methods consisting of in-depth interviews, participant observations, and open discussions to gain access to the *kathoeys*' life narratives of their experiences in the society of origin and the society of settlement. The fieldwork had started out in France where the researcher lived, then expanded to neighboring countries (Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland) due to the difficulties of finding a sufficient number of participants. Different methods were adapted to the context of different fieldworks. In France, the researcher was able to spend more time with each informant; therefore, the relationships between the researcher and informants were more personal. In this context, participant observations and field notes were favored. In contrast, in other countries that the researcher travelled to several times, the fieldwork duration was limited. Recorded interviews and discussions were preferred. The researcher used the snowball sampling methods as well as personal networks (peers and entourage networks) to find voluntary informants. Each interview lasted at least two hours on average.

All interviews were transcribed and codified, using a narrative analytic approach to be able to access an overall view of the *kathoey* migrants' experiences and identify different steps of their lives, meanings, and relations. Participant observations and ethnographic field notes were also analyzed using an inductive approach. These methods allowed research to discover progressively different aspects of the process of *kathoeys*' migration – for example, life conditions in Thailand, motivations to migrate, negotiations during migration, struggle to success, relationships with partners/husbands, economical-sexual-emotions continuum in intimate relations' negotiation, gender performance adaptions, and usage of sexuality. Participant observations, fieldnotes, and unrecorded discussions were also very helpful to enable data rechecking and validations of the recorded data. All codified materials were read fully many times to establish relevant themes. Coding and themes were presented and discussed with the researcher's supervisors to ensure accuracy.

This study gathered data from 26 participants, 25 to 65 years old, who come from different social backgrounds[3] (see Table 1). Among the 26 participants, six persons did not undergo any gender reassignment surgeries, but lived their lives as women. There was only one person who did not undergo surgery and cross-dressed from time to time. All of them identified themselves as *kathoey* or transwomen, except one person, who defined her/himself as a bisexual man. They came from different professional backgrounds. Not all of them were engaged in sex work at the time of the research, but more than half of the participants revealed their previous experiences in prostitution either in Thailand or in their countries of settlement. The participants had different marital statuses. The majority were in an official relationship, such as marriage or civil partnership, with a male partner. Eleven of them were single.

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3   Ten people were from rural areas and 16 people from urban areas. Six participants only had primary education, four of them had finished a secondary school. Nine of them had an associate's degree, six had a bachelor's degree and only one person had a master's degree.

Pseud-onyms	Age	Social Background	Education	Profession	Marital Status	Country of settlement
Pim	32	urban middle class	master's degree	Ph.D. student	in a relationship	France
Linda	44	rural poor	primary	housekeeper and oc-casionally engaged in sex work	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Tina	36	urban rich	associate's degree	restaurant owner (ex sex worker)	in an open rela-tionship	France
Kim	41	urban middle class	associate's degree	housewife	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Yumi	40	urban poor	primary	sex worker	single	France
Nou	33	rural poor	associate's degree	restaurant owner (ex sex worker)	single	France
Ploy	30	rural middle class	bachelor's degree	cook (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Pai	38	urban middle class	secondary	cook (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Maya	25	rural middle class	secondary	housewife	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Ning	42	urban middle class	bachelor's degree	waitress	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Lila	44	rural poor	primary	cook	single	France
Lee	52	urban poor	associate's degree	housewife (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (civil union)	Germany
Farah	36	rural middle class	associate's degree	sex worker	in a relationship (civil union)	Germany
Paula	35	urban poor	associate's degree	sex worker	single	Germany
Katty	50	urban rich	bachelor's degree	waitress in her brother's restaurant	single	Germany
Ming	65	urban poor	primary	sex worker	single	Germany
Kanya	42	urban poor	associate's degree	direct selling entrepre-neur (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (civil union)	Germany
Nid	42	rural middle class	bachelor's degree	housewife	in a relationship (civil union)	Switzerland
Amy	65	urban rich	secondary	ex sex worker	single	Switzerland
Kate	38	rural poor	secondary	waitress (ex sex worker in Thailand)	in a relationship (civil union)	Switzerland
Noy	46	urban middle class	associate's degree	sex worker	in a relationship (civil union)	Switzerland
Tik	55	rural poor	primary	sex worker	single	Switzerland
Nathalie	39	urban middle class	bachelor's degree	sales and marketing	in an open rela-tionship	Netherlands
Sophie	45	urban poor	primary	bar owner (ex sex worker)	single	Netherlands
Nook	46	rural middle class	associate's degree	waitress (ex sex worker)	single	Netherlands
Tip	52	urban middle class	bachelor's degree	entrepreneur (ex sex worker)	single	Netherlands

Table 1. List of participants
*Cohabitation of two unmarried people recognized by the French state

FINDINGS

This section will present key findings that are divided in three parts: the motivations to migrate, the negotiation of femininity in migration, and (trans)gender negotiation in intimate relationships.

From Thailand to Europe, Motivation to Migration

Pai muang nok can be translated literally to mean "going abroad". However, *muang nok* (abroad) does not mean all foreign countries. It connotes the land of wealth, modernity, and progress and Western countries seem to embody these ideas. The *kathoey* informants evoked the same expectation that inspired them to go abroad. For some participants, this had started since a very young age. Linda[4] explained:

> Since I was little, I went to the outdoor cinema where they showed the films of *muang nok*. That made me want to go abroad. I wanted to live like in the cinema, having a big house, beautiful cars, having a happy life with all luxury things. (Personal Communication, 9 January 2009, Paris)

The imaginary representation of Western countries was shared by many *kathoeys*, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds.[5] For those who came from poor families, *pai muang nok* represented the preferable choice in order to get out of their distress. Migrating to a Western destination, the land of promise, was absolutely the way out to improve their lives and ensuring social and economic mobility. Farah described how she decided to go to Germany: "I saw other *kathoeys*, the senior ones, who had already gone to Switzerland or Germany, they all came back so glamorous. Why did I need to be scared? Going abroad, we would be absolutely successful" (Personal Communication, 31 March 2009, Berlin).[6] Those who came from rich families explained their motivation by their conception of *muang nok* as 'civilized', 'tolerant', and 'egalitarian'. These reputations even became part of the criteria for selecting the country of destination. Nathalie, who quit her job and abandoned her bright future in a press company, explained her reason for choosing to go to the Netherlands as follows:

> At that time, I still dressed like a man . . . but everyone knew that I was a *kathoey*. The work conditions were okay, but some people . . . worked less than me, but they gained more than me. . . . I thought this was not right. They were maybe '*anti-kathoey*'. . . . At the end of 1991, I quit my job and I came here to Holland. I had done my research. I knew that Holland was the country where they accepted the third sex like me the most. My goal was fixed to here, the only country that I wished to come to. I really had thought so hard before quitting my job. (Personal Communication, 15 May 2010, Amsterdam)

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4   All the names of participants in this article are pseudonyms.

5   This research distinguishes three groups of social and economic backgrounds based on how the participants described themselves. Eleven people said that they came from financially poor families, twelve were from a middle-class income group, and three came from rich and upper-class families.

6   Farah was living in Munich at that time. She came to Berlin to visit a friend, Lee.

In spite of their economic and social background, these examples show how the image of Western countries was nourished and perpetuated in the Thai culture of migration as the best alternative to earn incomes and to improve one's livelihood (Rungmanee, 2021). The culture of migration was transmitted from one generation to another, within families and among relatives, and especially among trans peer networks and communities. The examples of those who had returned home successfully inspired the younger generations who put their effort into imitating the same pattern of migration. In this sense, the departure cannot be considered separately from the return in their reality as well as in the imaginary. The decision to leave can only make sense if the return is hopefully significant (Briquet, 2003, p. 139). Returning home as a successful person (*dai di*) was a compulsory passage of *pai muang nok*.

Although *kathoey* migrants' motivations were quite similar, their modes of migration were slightly different from each other. We can distinguish two main groups, the older generation who arrived in Europe before 2000 and those who arrived after 2000. The main factor that differentiated these two generations came from policy changes within European countries. For the older generation, *kathoey* informants affirmed that coming to Europe was easier than nowadays. They could come to work as entertainers, dancers, and later on became involved in sex work, with temporary work permit visas that they could obtain easily. The *kathoey* migrants often relied on their peer networks to legalize their status. The senior *kathoeys* who were already well settled in Europe usually played the role of intermediary and proposed their services, helping the younger ones to get a job, providing financial guarantees, and finding a partner to arrange a marriage of convenience. These services were not for free. They had to pay the price, or ended up with a large amount of debt to be paid in installments. Most of the *kathoeys* in this situation decided to migrate with the aim of engaging in prostitution. For the younger generation, a new wave of migration via same-sex union was more and more popular, due to legalization of same-sex marriage or civil union in European countries. From our participants, all of those who came to Europe after 2000 arrived in European territory via marriage or visitor visa supported by their partners.

The differences exist between different social backgrounds as well. Those from an economically poor social background and with low education attainment tended to explain their reason for migration mainly because of their financial and material needs. However, those from middle-class income or higher social backgrounds with a higher education level shared some other ideas related to transgender identity. Katty arrived in Germany through a work permit visa, as her brother owned many Thai restaurants in Germany. Coming from a very rich family, she proclaimed that her life had never been deprived. She always got everything she wanted as the youngest child of the family. But she still wanted to go abroad. She explained:

> At first, I just wanted to come. It was easy for me and my family could support me, so I came here. Just in case I find someone, find my German husband to whom I can marry. And if he is rich too (laugh). Everyone thinks like that and me too. (Personal Communication, 6 April 2009, Postdam)

Many of our informants assumed that the future for *kathoeys* in Thailand was not very bright. Lacking same-sex marriage laws as well as gender recognition laws, Thai transwomen are legally male. This situation has created social stigma and discriminations in everyday life throughout their life cycle starting from school until adult age. *Kathoey* informants faced job discrimination and discrimination in workplaces, and they were often denied access to protections and social welfare due to their transgender identity, as there is no legal recognition for transgender in Thailand.[7] Ploy explained that her motivation was that she did not want to go to the end of her life all alone: "What can we do next? In Thailand, we cannot have a family" (Fieldnote, April 2010, Marseille). In Thai social representation, a *kathoey* is considered as someone who will never be lucky in love. Thai men will one day leave the *kathoey,* the 'second-class woman', for a 'real' (biological) woman. Jackson (1997) suggested that this expression may have come from the sexual practices of young men with *kathoeys*. But, when these young men arrive at the age to get married, they are likely to choose a woman, not a *kathoey*, in order to keep on their masculine role. In this case, *kathoeys* are only an alternative or 'a second choice' for a temporary relationship.

Interestingly, *kathoeys*' exclusion from the Thai matrimonial market seems to be similar to some cases of Thai migrant women who seek to marry a *farang* or a Westerner. Many of these women have already been divorced or separated from their Thai husbands. Being of a certain age and having children from their previous unions creates social stigmas and barriers that restrain them from finding new Thai partners (Suksomboon, 2011, p. 233). Therefore, they are excluded from the Thai matrimonial market much like *kathoeys*. Hence, a *farang* husband seems to be the solution to have a stable and acceptable relationship and eventually start a new life, a new family. For Formoso (2001), *farang* men are viewed as kindhearted men who can accept poor Thai women, despite their family, their social conditions, and financial difficulties. Influenced by this ideology of *muang nok* and *farang* man, *kathoey* migrants were also motivated by the hope of having a faithful relationship, building a family and being accepted as the female partner by a European partner and society.

Femininity in transition and negotiation

Living in a European context, all participants confirmed that they were able to live as women in everyday life without being labelled as *kathoey*. Being called *madame* at the café or at the shopping mall made them feel more confident to live as females. As the Asian male body usually has less body hair, less muscular and masculine characteristics than Europeans, Thai *kathoey* are also usually pretty small and can blend in among local European females. Most of them had already begun their transition from a very young age. Therefore, for the *kathoey* informants, a European eye could

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7   For example, Thai *kathoeys* tend to be denied when they apply for a job due to their second-class women status. Hopeless, many try to look for salaried jobs in the informal sector or in the stereotypical jobs where they are more accepted, such as in entertainment as cabaret performers or beauty pageants, in the beauty industry such as make-up artists or sales persons in cosmetics (Suriyasarn, 2014, p. 94). Those who work in public sectors usually can't wear female clothes or uniforms due to the lack of recognition of their female gender. They are forced to rebecome men by their superiors. (This data is based on the author's recent research on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Civil Services and Government Agencies in Thailand, forthcoming).

hardly see or distinguish the physical differences between Thai transgenders and biological females from the outside. According to the informants, their femininity and female gender performance pass for real in the European context. They can live their life in the female role without fear of being outed as they experienced in Thailand. Maya told us about her experience of being outed during her honeymoon trip in a restaurant in Phuket, Thailand: "Two Thai women approached my husband and whispered in his ear. They told him that I was a *kathoey*. But he knew it. He did not care. I was very angry" (Fieldnote, August 2009, Toulouse). In Thailand, many *kathoeys* think that *kathoey* acceptance is just an illusion. They were still facing this kind of gender-based discrimination, even violence, in public spaces (Suriyasarn, 2014, p. 41). *Kathoey* informants had experienced being discriminated against when accessing hotels, restaurants, or bars because of their transgender identity. The context of migration allowed Thai *kathoeys* to escape from these social constraints and fully enjoy their lives as females.

However, when it came to situations where legal identity must be revealed, things got more complicated. A more welcoming social setting of the country of settlement did not necessarily mean total acceptance and zero prejudice. Many *kathoey* migrants had bad experiences going through passport control and immigration check points when they travelled. Some of them, who still carried Thai passports with male legal status, were often detained for several hours to have their identity verified. Some were mocked by the immigration officers in front of other passengers. Tina recalled when she had to deal with bankers and accountants when she wanted to open her restaurant in Paris:

> I went to see several banks; they were all looking at me. Ah *kathoey,* they looked down on me. When I went to submit my project to get the credit loan, the banker said 'ah, why Monsieur?', when he looked at my name, 'ah, you are not a woman', he said. It depends on places and people. Some places, everything was fine but some places not . ... I felt like they did not take me seriously. (Personal Communication, 22 October 2008, Paris)

The example of Tina showed that there was still some social prejudice towards transgenders in the host country. She further explained that she was both *kathoey* and *kariang*[8], which refers to an ethnic minority in Thailand:

> We have two *Ka - Kathoey* and *Kariang*. Here in France, the word *kathoey* doesn't exist. Those who are not blended in will be judged. It is because we are both Thai and *kathoey*. We are transsexuals. Here, there are some negative images of trans foreigners, like those who prostitute in the Bois de Boulogne. This is a barrier for us. In France, the papers, the laws, legal identity all matter and are important. We, who do not really conform to the system. We are judged as strange/odd.[9] (Personal Communication, 22 October 2008, Paris).

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8   Kariang is the Thai word for Karen, an ethnic minority group living in the border area of Thailand and Myanmar.

9   She used the word *tua pralad* in Thai, which can be translated as freak as well.

Calling herself *kariang* is an act of self-depreciation; she identified herself as an inferior racial minority in the West, similarly to the *Kariang* people in the eyes of the majority of Thais in Thailand. As a migrant and a gender minority, this double social stigma had shaped her experience and forced her to readapt her tactics of negotiation. When she had to deal with French administration, she tied up her long hair and adopted gender-neutral, unisex clothes, without make-up. An androgynous look could keep away unpleasant remarks. Nou, for example, always kept her male identity photo in her purse to attest her previous identity as a male in case of inspection from the authorities (she showed her picture during the interview on 14 May 2009, Paris). Linda, who did not undergo any sex reassignment operations, chose to keep her masculine look during daytime to blend in at her workplace at a gay sauna. She cross-dressed when going out with friends and her partner at night.

In the European setting, the *kathoeys*' female identity was not accepted once and for all. It depended on the situation, interactions, and the power relations structure. Navigating from one context to another, *kathoey* migrants may readapt their gender performances, opting for gender camouflage strategies in order to blend in and fit into the hetero- and cis-normativity of settings and their regulations. Power structures that were imposed on *kathoeys* could be local or national (for example, laws), linked to the social constraints of the society of settlement and from the Thai structure. Lee said she used to avoid or limit her social interactions with the Thai community in Berlin, as someone might out her or reveal her trans identity publicly. Tactics of survival and negotiation depended largely on the capacity to manage social rapports in everyday life. Farah explained the importance of being able to communicate effectively, meaning to be able to speak the local language:

> That is why I went to language classes. If you can talk to the police, when you get controlled by them, at least you can tell them something 'I'm sorry I forgot my passport at home'. If you can speak their language, you can tell them a story and get out of the situation. (Personal Communication, 31 March 2009, Berlin)

Kathoeys femininity was not something fixed and unmalleable in theses contexts of *co-presence*. Rather, *kathoeys* anticipated reactions from other actors and social interaction to find the best way of presenting and modifying their self-display. Many strategies were intentionally planned and put in place to escape from controls and constraints that might threaten their security and destabilize their well-being, as well as their migration project. Trans identity and female gender performance could even be commodified in order to survive in the migration context. Paula identified him/herself as gay man and bisexual. Paula revealed that he/she became *kathoey*, starting gender transition by taking hormones, changing appearance, and getting breast surgery, in order to work in the sex industry for a living:

> So, I did it, I started to take hormones, then injections. I also watched *kathoey* cabaret shows, learned how to talk, to walk like them. I practiced in my room in front of the mirror. Now I've got used to it. But if you ask me deep inside me, it is not who I am. But I think if I can earn 10 million baht, I will become a man again. (Personal Communication, 25 June 2009, Berlin).

Paula's story gave us some evidence about the role of sex, gender, and sexuality in the process of migration. A sexed body, gender performances, and usage of sexuality can be mobilized and invested to maximize their earning potential in order to respond to the necessity of survival in migration. *Kathoey* migrants made use of themselves in these new conditions of *co-presence* for their own interest, in other words to make a success of their migration. Sexuality as well as gender performances can become a resource or a tool in order to negotiate in a new social setting and to be able to survive their migration (Lévy & Lieber, 2009, p. 720).

"To tell or not to tell, that's the question": self-exposure and gender negotiation

When it came to more intimate social interaction, the *kathoeys* femininity was also at stake. Many *kathoeys* were really concerned about how they would tell their partner about their transgender experience. Living their lives daily as women in European society allowed them to enjoy new lives without worrying about *kathoey* social stigma. Consequently, telling 'the truth' could disturb their lives as women, and could eventually lead to a rupture in their relationships. Lee explained:

> It is the most horrible thing for a *kathoey*. The problem that we fear so much is to be accepted as who we are. And the most important thing when we live with someone is to tell him who we really are. (Personal Communication, 30 March 2009, Berlin).

Some *kathoeys* preferred telling their partner right away at the very first time when they met or had a date. Telling the truth avoids eventually any misunderstanding when it came to intimate moments and could lead to a more open and sincere relationship. Ploy explained that she preferred to make it clear before starting a relationship: "We never know. We can accidentally have to deal with someone who is *anti-kathoey*. He could hurt or kill us" (Fieldnote, May 2010, Marseille). In some contexts, when the possibility to survive in migration was related to a stable relationship with a European man, *kathoey* migrants had to really think and figure out whether they would tell or not tell their partner about their transfemale identity, how, and when to tell it. Lee recalled how she started the relationship with her partner and waited until three years later to tell him about her transgender identity during their New Year trip in Thailand:

> It was a wonderful day, but, it was a D-Day for me. I told myself if he could accept it, everything would be fine but if he could not accept it, I would break up. . . . Before this, I took care of him, I was gentle, sweet with him. Housework, cooking, cleaning, I did it all for him. I had showed him who I really was, showing him that everything was going well with me. . . . And I told him 'I was not like this, like I am now'. I don't remember exactly what I said. 'I was a little boy, you know'. He did not seem to be surprised. He said 'what happened in the past, belonged to the past, I love you as who you are now', oh my god!!! When I told my friends this story, they said you did not need to tell the man. They already know. Only they don't say it because they don't really care about it. I was really relieved after that difficult moment. (Personal Communication, 30 March 2009, Berlin).

The example of Lee showed us that transgender identity revelation to partners could be a long process. Lee had put forward her female qualities, she tried to be a good wife, and the 'right one' for her partner. Female roles as a devoted housewife, gentle and sweet spouse, or skillful sex partner, were invested and valued in the relationship with partners to negotiate and make acceptable their transgender experiences. These traditional and orientalist feminine roles that were perceived socially as stereotypes of Asian females were utilized as strategies to negotiate their female transgender identity.

Revealing transgender identity or trans characteristics can be advantageous in some contexts. To be labelled as a non-operated ladyboy in sex advertisements in adult magazines was part of a process of 'self-branding', differentiating themselves in the sex market. Many trans ex sex workers affirmed that non-operated transgender or ladyboy sex workers were more highly in demand among clients than post-operated *kathoeys* who had to compete within the female market. And these clients, the majority being male, sought passive sexual experiences. *Kathoeys* with "a serpent" (i.e., with a penis) were better paid because they could perform an active role in sexual intercourse. Paula said more than 90% of his/her clients were looking for this experience. And he/she could receive 5-6 clients per day, but sometimes the demands could be more than 20 persons per day. A hyperfeminine-look, active, and exotic sexual role play were his/her 'signature'. Again, gender and sexuality played an important role within intimacy interactions, whether it had to deal with permanent partners in a long-term relationship or in temporary ones like client-prostitute interactions. Being feminine, appropriating feminine roles, and providing accessible sexual fantasy were efforts of *kathoey* migrants meant to maximize the possibility of being accepted and maintaining their status within the context of migration. *Kathoey* migrants could access this status of female because of these gender and sexual negotiations. Most of our participants affirmed that their Western partners accepted them as women (there was only one person who said that her boyfriend could not accept it and they broke up). At the same time, these efforts and negotiations seemed to make the relationship between *kathoeys* and *farang* men possible in the European context. These couples appeared to be totally ordinary heteronormative couples, unlike the stereotype of *kathoey* and Thai men in the Thai context.

Sometimes, the negotiation of female identity could also become a couple's or even a family-in-law's affair. Some European partners also worried about their wives' 'truth'. Nid recalled how her husband told her to buy sanitary pads when she went shopping with his mother. This was their strategy to appear 'normal' and dissimulate her trans identity from his mother. Tina also told us a similar story when her mother-in-law told her to put down the toilette seat every time when she finished using the bathroom, in case there were other guests in the house, so that they would not suspect her behavior and her gender identity. Gender camouflage or identity readaptation strategies were now a family's affair that involved other actors from the entourage.

These examples showed that gender identity, far from being independent, individualist, or disconnected from other social aspects, is rather situated and intertwined within other social tissues. The imbrication of gender and sexual roles were put into practice and experienced differently by *kathoey* migrants throughout time and space and within different contexts. While being oneself was linked to being with others,

kathoey migrants' subjectivity was constructed spatially and temporally in the everyday lived experiences of migration by employing different forms of agency and negotiations. Sometimes male or female, sometimes trans, *kathoeys* reappropriated what was considered as normal, valued, or accepted in the *co-presence* of migrations. Hence, the femininity of *kathoey* migrants was constantly in transition, navigating through processes of readaptation and relocation in these transcultural settings.

CONCLUSION

This article aims to point out important roles of sex, gender, and sexuality in the process of migration. Firstly, they were mobilized and strategized in *kathoey* migrants' gender performance to be more feminine in one situation or more masculine in others. *Kathoey* migrants were crossing borders not only between masculinity and femininity, but also across the borders of culture and multi-level social contexts of *here and there*, where different hegemonic power and both hetero- and cis-normative regulations are at play. While moving back and forth in everyday situations, the juxtaposition of the *co-presence* structures moved, creating a margin of possibilities to escape and to relocate one's self and renegotiate (well-)being. Concurrently, these dynamic mobilities reshaped power structures and social constraints that could also create the risk of falling into new forms of oppression or social exclusion. From gender camouflage, female gender performances, reappropriation of heteronormative social norms, or playing the 'queer', as well as a usage of sexuality, *kathoey* migrants strategically adapted their way of being and presenting themselves, depending on different contexts and different actors that they were facing in order to fit in the new social environment where they now had to live and survive. Identifying as women, transgender, Thai ladyboy, male migrant, or disidentifying to such categories, their *femininity in transition* appeared to be a dynamic and multilayer process, showing the fluidity of the sexed and embodied self as well as the *kathoey* migrants' agency. The *kathoey* migrants make use of the interactive roles of embodied sex, gender, and sexuality that can potentially represent a stigma in one situation, but also a resource for migration in others (Chossière, 2021; see also Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022, this issue). Thai *kathoeys'* migration experiences showed that sex, gender, and sexuality are not necessarily and definitely fixed in place, but they have to be grasped in terms of material and structural aspects without ignoring the cultural and social particularities that play a role in the production of migration strategies (Carrillo, 2017, pp. 259-260).

The case of *kathoey* migrants can lead to further implications on sex, gender, and sexuality in the heterosexual relationships of *mia-farang* and *farang* men, especially the role of sexuality in the migration process. From this fieldwork, some complex and complicated Thai-European heterosexual relations were encountered, such as the case of a Thai wife who discovered sexual pleasure with a *farang* male partner, then realized that she had always been attracted to women. So, she decided to break up with him and now lives with a female partner. In another example, a Thai woman was married to a German man but also maintained an intimate relationship with another Thai woman who was a *tom* (or a butch, a masculine lesbian). In *mia-farang* studies, the question of sexual identity transformation of *mia-farang* as a consequence of the process of migrations is still overlooked, taking for granted that Thai-Westerner

relationships conform steadily to a heteronormative model. This empirical visibility of *kathoeys* in migration can lead us to 'queering' or 'sexualizing' Thai migration in a broader way. Another limit of the research is that we have so little information about the Western partners, how they also adapt and negotiate in such transcultural relationships. This study has brought to light some clues on the European partners' participation in the *kathoeys*' gender performance and negotiation. Future research can potentially study this aspect in depth and expand these research questions.

Thai *kathoey* migrants, similarly to other queer migrants in Europe, risked being doubly marginalized as they were ethnic minorities in the host countries and sexual minorities within both the host society and the home community (Mole, 2021). However, their case seemed to be different from those transgender or queer asylum seekers from more conservative countries as they were not facing high or severe risk and danger back home or within Thai communities. Seen as a gay's paradise, the motherland still does not warmly ensure their rights with open arms. Recently, the Thai constitutional court declared officially that LGBTIQ+ people cannot be recognized as having the same rights as men and women by refusing the possibility of same sex marriage. This legal discrimination and political pressure can increase the recent tendency of *kathoeys*' migration to developed countries (Ocha, 2020, pp. 132-133). In addition, with the COVID-19 crisis, and consequently the Thai tourism business collapse, many transgender cabaret theaters and other night entertainment businesses were closed, including bars, night clubs, and massage parlors, where a lot of *kathoeys* worked. The young generation now has a hard time finding jobs, especially those who come from very poor social backgrounds. This prevailing phenomenon can push more and more young *kathoeys* to seek to go abroad and migrate. Searching for a *farang* partner via social media and applications will possibly be an increasing phenomenon, deserving closer attention from academic scholars, since the *kathoeys*' culture of migration might be intensified in the next couple of years.

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Transgender *Kathoey* Socially Imagining Relationships with Western Men in Thailand: Aspirations for Gender Affirmation, Upward Social Mobility, and Family Acceptance

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This article studies the aspirations and experiences of *kathoey* (Thai male-to-female trans* people) from poor rural Isan in enduring cross-border relationships with Western men. Drawing from biographical life stories, we try to unpack the *cultural script* through which partnering a Western man is seen as a plausible pathway for a better *kathoey* life in Thailand. We study the opportunities such partnering presents for achieving goals of gender affirmation, social advancement, and re-gaining merit within family relations. In the face of significant discriminatory barriers, *kathoey* in our study managed to build lives that they saw as self-validating, materially successful, and significantly conferring gender recognition. They understood their relationships as socially and personally much more than access to financial resources and drew important sources of emotional support, especially for gender validation from them. Western men were seen as more dedicated to partnering, caring, and being publicly seen in social settings (including family), compared to Thai.

Keywords: Cross-Border Relationships; Gender Affirmation; *Kathoey*; Thailand; Transgender

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INTRODUCTION

A significant research field on Thai-foreigner partnerships studies how and why Thai women (*mia farang*) are motivated to search for wealthier foreign men, often initially (sex) tourists, as a route out of poverty and their subsequent transformative life experiences (e.g., Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013; Lapanun, 2019; Statham, 2020, 2021; Statham et al., 2020). Although nonheteronormative Thai-foreigner relationships are commonplace and Thailand is marketed as a tourists' "gay paradise" (Sanders, 2002), there is surprisingly little discussion of LGBTQ+ relationships within cross-border

relationships research. Instead, the topic is mostly addressed through the valuable queer studies lens (Jackson, 2011), or as sex-tourism (Ocha, 2020).

Here we study Thai male-to-female trans* *kathoey* who have enduring relationships with Western[1] men in Thailand, examining their aspirations and experiences that carried them on this life-trajectory. We use the term *kathoey* as a Thai-specific category for people born with a male sexual physiology, and a feminine gender identity. Historically, Thai society has a tripartite gender/sex system: masculine men, feminine women, and *kathoey* (Morris, 1994). *Kathoey* does not equate directly with the Western "trans-". It is broader, including a range of male-to-female gender identifications: some take hormones or undergo sex reassignment and cosmetic surgery to live fully as women; some dress in feminine styles, but only in specific settings/times; while others live as visibly effeminate men. Participants often used "*kathoey*" self-referentially. This is partly problematic, because *kathoey* is used socially with stigmatizing meaning. Still, we use *kathoey* as an analytic category that is *in* and *of* Thai society, while acknowledging the terminological challenges.

We see potential added-value in drawing insights from the cross-border marriage field (Constable, 2005) to study *kathoey*, because our focus is on their aspirations, some of which have parallels to the experiences of *mia farang*, for whom the "cultural script" (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013) to partner a wealthy foreigner motivates many women to migrate to tourist zones in search of a better life (Lapanun, 2019). Today, many women seeking foreign partners come from a range of social classes and backgrounds, and the same is true for *kathoey*; however, rural poverty has traditionally been and still remains a core driver of this phenomenon. Most research covers women from the poor, rural Northeastern region of Isan. Similarly, five of the six *kathoey* in our study were born in Isan, aged between 30-40 years. They are a generation, who as in classic *mia farang* narratives, migrated within Thailand leaving poor rural households in Isan to find work, often in (sex) tourist cities. However, we know little of their specific aspirations and life-journeys to achieve social advancement and gender affirmation while facing transphobic discrimination from heteronormative Thai society. What does the cultural script for a *kathoey* Isan person to partner a Western man look like? And how do those who made this life-journey view their efforts to realize goals for gender affirmation, upward social mobility, and family acceptance through this lens?

Our study does not claim representativeness. It is explorative, aiming to provide insight into the relatively undiscussed topic of nonheteronormative relationships between *kathoey* from poor, rural backgrounds and Western men. Of course, there are limits to the parallel with *mia farang*. *Kathoey* have their own specific experiences of discrimination in trying to find a social space for gender recognition within the dominant sexual mores, values, and family and social relations within Thai society. Also, Thai law requires *kathoey* to keep the male gender on their official documentation, while same-sex marriage is not permitted. This means *kathoey* are not able to gain access to property rights and social welfare from their partner through legal marriage, an important resource for *mia farang* empowerment (see Statham, 2020). Likewise, this documentation problem makes it difficult for *kathoey* to move abroad

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1   Western covers people from Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

with their partners, so that most *kathoey*-Westerner relations remain located in Thailand, with the Western partner often visiting for months at a time.

By unpacking some *kathoeys'* aspirations and understandings of their cross-border partnerships, we hope to allow space for their voices, and move beyond limiting stereotypes that depict these relationships as sex work or paid companionship (Pravattiyagul, 2021). We aim to establish that emotions, (non-sexual) intimacy, and aspirations to overcome stigma and rejection from Thai society are important factors, and crucial for sustaining relationships over the long-term, even if they stand alongside financial motivations.

KATHOEY IN THE 'GAY PARADISE'

Thailand is tolerant towards sexual minorities compared to other Asian societies: the state decriminalized homosexuality in 1956, Buddhist teachings do not declare homosexuality immoral, and homophobic violence is low (Jackson, 1999). In the 1960s, Thailand was a pioneer for gay tourism and today neighborhoods of Bangkok and tourist cities are significant global venues (Jackson, 2011), purpose-built for foreign tastes. Like their heterosexual counterparts, these venues are premised on the availability of sexual encounters, provided by low-income Thais, and questionable, but state-sponsored, stereotypes of 'exotic' Thai people as sensual, caring, and sexually open (Sunanta, 2020). *Kathoey* are core to this fetishized exotic commodification of Thai-ness marketed to wealthy male tourists. As Jackson argues, "*kathoey* is the iconic face of queer Thailand" (2011, p. 35). A distinctively Thai phenomenon, which the state tourist board markets to attract tourists to ladyboy cabarets and bars, *kathoey* are celebrated as a spectacle: e.g., their beauty pageants feature on national television, but they also face ridicule, prejudice, and significant transphobic discrimination.

The state enacted basic rights for LGBTQ+ communities against discrimination and hate speech only in 2015. People who have undergone sex-change surgery cannot apply for legal recognition of their gender change. This importantly restricts their chances in all domains of social life where documentation is required, including employment, contractual transactions, and international travel. This prevents *kathoey* from marrying partners, and potentially gaining access to rights (e.g., property, inheritance) available to women in heterosexual cross-border marriages. Transphobic prejudice and discrimination are well documented in education, the workplace, and by families (USAID, 2014). Although LGBTQ+ activism has mobilized over the last decades, *kathoey* still often live on the margins, unable to fully express their gender identity without repercussions.

Marginalization is especially acute for *kathoey* from poor, rural backgrounds in Isan. Within the rigid class and status hierarchies of Thai society, Isan people are looked down upon socially by urban middle classes and considered backward, darker-skinned peasants who speak a Lao dialect (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Keyes, 2014). *Kathoey* from Isan face high barriers of double discrimination from gender and class/status to build a life. This is why many move to tourist zones with ladyboy scenes. Such neighborhoods are highly limited geographical spaces that transgress mainstream Thai norms because they are explicitly constructed to cater for foreign tourists' (sexual) fantasies and tastes. But from a *kathoey* perspective, tourist zones

can provide new opportunities for work (albeit often sex work), affirming gender identities, and experimenting in ways of being *kathoey* and being part of a *kathoey* peer community, and as a potential route out of poverty by partnering wealthy foreigners (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021).

A CULTURAL SCRIPT FOR A BETTER *KATHOEY* LIFE: PARTNERING WESTERN MEN

Notwithstanding clear differences that *kathoeys'* specific forms of gender identification bring, relevant insights can still be drawn from Thai women's experiences documented in heterosexual marriage migration research (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2019; Statham, 2020; 2021). Cross-border relationship studies have importantly shifted from explanations of economic motivations, to emphasize intimacy, emotions, and culture, as reasons why women might seek and engage in relationships with foreign men (Constable, 2005; Yang & Lu, 2010). Typically, these examinations of "global marriage-scapes" (Constable, 2005) study first the gendered power, material, emotional, intimate, and care exchanges between individual women and men in a partnership, relative to the intersecting inequalities in which each is socially embedded; and, second, the lived experiences, wellbeing, and socio-economic outcomes for the partner from the economically poorer background, usually in the Global South.

Jongwilaiwan & Thompson's (2013) study discusses relationships between *mia farang* and Singaporean men as *negotiated exchanges*, emphasizing that partners make an implicit bargain, whereby the underlying asymmetric power structure is an exchange of material and financial support (by men) for emotional, intimacy and care support (by women). However, within this overall complex package, emotional care and material support can flow in both directions, and the balance can shift over time (see also Statham, 2020). This highlights the blurred lines between the emotional/intimacy and material/financial dimensions of everyday negotiations within cross-border partnerships, and that we should be cautious about pre-defining a partner's role within a rigid single framework of sex work, domestic work, care-giving, or love.

Jongwilaiwan & Thompson (2013) also argue that these negotiated relationships between partners are the cutting edge where agency transforms transnational patriarchal relations. Similarly, we think *kathoey*-Westerner relationships are an important field where agency can socially redefine what it is to be *kathoey*, and transform social understandings of being *kathoey*, relative to dominant gender, heterosexual, and family relations norms, both in Thailand and the West. Important in this respect are the resonant cultural scripts (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013, p. 370), i.e., socially constructed *kathoey* narratives that generate aspirations for individuals to follow this specific transformative life-trajectory. Our subjects are embedded in a globalized social world that makes relationships with Western men seem possible and plausible ways to gain access to resources that are 'blocked' to them due to discrimination, a lack of enforceable rights, and financial and family pressures. At the same time, the emotional, caring, and intimate components of Thai-Western relationships can provide warmth, security and sometimes a sense of family for *kathoey*, and an opportunity to strive for self-validation, social self-realization, and recognition of gender identity.

Here we aim to explore this cultural script through which a generation of *kathoey* from poor rural Isan understand their aspirations (past and present) and life-stories as socially embedded in relationships with Western men. We present a snapshot of subjects' understandings of their agency, lived experiences, and outcomes, across four intersecting dimensions of their shared cultural script: social imaginaries of Western men; needs for gender affirmation; goals for upwards social mobility; and desires for family acceptance. Taken together, these dimensions give insight to the perceived narrative, i.e., cultural script, real or imagined, through which *kathoey* aspire and act to partner Western men in their search for a better life. Whether fantasy or factually-based, a cultural script makes this social pathway seem the most realizable way to achieve gender recognition and a route out of poverty. The power of a cultural script is that it carries a social force as a self-fulfilling prophecy, generating more aspirations and agency among other *kathoey* looking for a way out of transphobia and discrimination. It shapes the way *kathoey* see their negotiated relationships with their Western partners.

Social imaginaries of Western men

The way *kathoey* perceive and socially imagine a future life with Western men through ideas of gender, sexuality, and modernity shapes their agency towards that goal. *Kathoey* can be likely to see Western men through rose-tinted glasses as modern, good family men, and reliable providers (ten Brummelhuis, 1999; Winter, 2011), given harsh experiences of discrimination, family rejection, and bad treatment by Thai men. They see Western men as more likely to accept and be sexually attracted to their female gender identification compared to Thai men, who are less willing to be in open relationships, or use intimate relationships with *kathoey* for financial gain through 'pimping'. There are parallels to aspirant female marriage migrants, who see opportunities to achieve wealth, move abroad, and gain greater personal freedoms away from rigid gender roles and social constrictions of mundane village life (Lapanun, 2019). Generally, relationships with foreigners confer status and economic benefits for poor rural people (Lapanun, 2012). Imaginaries do not transfer easily into realities, however, and can be based on misperceptions.

Gender affirmation

Affirmation of *kathoeys'* felt and expressed gender is pivotal for their wellbeing and ability to have a satisfactory life (see also Sevelius, 2013). Research underlines their strong desire to be accepted physically and socially as female (ten Brummelhuis, 1999; Thongkrajai, this issue). To bridge the discrepancy between their physiognomy and their identity, some *kathoey* develop strategies to perform the 'perfect' woman – from controlling their voice to changing their body language. Attempts to conceal masculine sexual attributes in public can be very stressful for *kathoey*, as ten Brummelhuis' interviewee stated, "We are *phu-ying* (female), but since we are not real, we have to do everything better" (1999, p. 127). Faced by harassment and pervasive stigma, gender affirmation is vital for *kathoey* self-validation, to be seen for who they are and treated accordingly. Tourist zones can be places where dominant Thai heteronormative

social norms are transgressed in a way that supports spaces for living as *kathoey*, albeit sometimes through sex work (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021). Some *kathoey* "choose to pay the price of being stigmatized by engaging in sex work to be able to live some form of the idealized Thai gay/kathoey lifestyle" (Jackson, 2011, p. 202). Possibilities for relationships with Westerners can be seen as a chance to be a "treated like 'real' women" in a heterosexual family (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 92).

Upward social mobility

Kathoey from poor peasant backgrounds face high class/status barriers on top of transphobic prejudice. These can be formidable barriers to upward social mobility. LGBTQ+ workers face significant institutional discrimination throughout the employment cycle (ILO/Suriyasarn, 2014, pp. 51-64). For example, *kathoey* applicants are often given psychological tests, asked about sexuality in interviews, and unfairly denied positions. Their chances to earn a living commensurate with education and abilities are highly restricted. This work discrimination makes it hard to be part of society: "long-term unemployment reduces self-reliance and any capacity to contribute to the welfare of parents, grandparents, or younger siblings. It drags down self-esteem and drives many into sex work, including in specialized 'ladyboy' bars" (Winter, 2011, p. 261). Confronted by blocked opportunities for social advancement, *kathoeys'* aspirations for upwards social mobility become channeled into a narrow set of available pathways located in tourist zones where they can exert agency (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021). In this context, aspirations for upwards social mobility become strongly tied to aspirations for establishing a long-term relationship with a wealthy Westerner.

Family acceptance

Family is the definitive social and economic unit in Thailand. Filial piety norms strongly shape family relationships, whereby children face significant expectations to provide financial and emotional care for ageing parents. This includes trying to be a 'good child' and preserve the family's social face publicly (Morris, 1994), given that having a *kathoey* child can generate social rejection. For *kathoey*, acceptance or rejection by family members significantly influences how they fare over the life-course. Jackson (2011, p. 31) follows Isaraporn (2009), arguing that family is essential to understanding Thai gay identities as "formed through a negotiation of familial expectations in which the autonomy to live a non-heteronormative life is legitimated by a demonstrated capacity to care for one's parents (which) may not necessarily be felt as a burden." This explains why *kathoey* exert agency to be included and recognized within their family, and why family shapes their aspirations, including the goal of a Western benefactor. Notwithstanding childhood experiences of rejection, *kathoey* seldom break with family. Remittances to family can be an important source of self-esteem and lead to family recognition: "personal wealth can be used to 'buy' a space for queer sexual autonomy within a heteronormative culture wherein family ties remain central to queer identity and a sense of self-worth" (Jackson, 2011, p. 202).

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on biographical interviews with *kathoey* in enduring relationships with Western men. Interviews were conducted in Thai, by Thai researchers, between August 2016 and November 2017. The interviews lasted at least one hour, were recorded, transcribed, and professionally translated to English. Participants were recruited using researchers' contacts and links via LGBTQ+ NGOs. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to recount their life-stories, discussing their aspirations, experiences and outcomes regarding gender identity, sexuality, partnering, work, and family relations. To analyze the interview material, first we read the full transcripts several times. We then applied a narrative frame analysis approach: a frame is a "schemata of interpretation" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21) that guides cognitive perceptions of reality. We interpreted how interviewees framed the four analytic dimensions (social imaginaries; gender affirmation; social mobility aspirations; family acceptance) of the cultural script in their respective life-stories.

Kathoey come from different classes, generations, places, and backgrounds that importantly shape their specific life experiences. Our sample is small (n6) and not representative. We do not aim to speak of a general *kathoey* perspective. Instead, our focus is primarily on the cultural script of a specific cohort of *kathoey*, now aged between 30 and 40, who grew up in poverty in rural Isan. Isan people migrated *en masse* to cities and abroad as an important driving force of Thailand's rapid social and

Subject Interviewee	Age at Interview	Place of origin	Current location	Time in relationship with Westerner	Westerner partner age	Years younger than Western partner	Receives financial income from Westerner	Employment (outside care-work for partner)	Home ownership in hometown	Financial remittances to family
A	30	Loei (Isan)	Pattaya	7 years	64	34	yes, on request	None	Yes	Yes, occasionally
B	40	Khorat (Isan)	Phuket	6-7 years	70	30	THB 27K per month	Owns a health business	No	THB 15K per month
C	33	Surin (Isan)	Pattaya	2 years	65	32	THB 40K per month	Owns a bar with Western partner	No	THB 15K per month
D	32	Sisaket (Isan)	Pattaya	6 years	81	49	THB 20K per month	Works at bar on "scene"	No	THB 3-5K per month
E	35	Khon Kaen (Isan)	Pattaya	7-8 years	78	43	THB 10K per month	Works at NGO (LGBT+ rights)	Yes	THB 4K per month
F	22	Samut Prakan (Central)	Bangkok	10 months	47	25	Occasional gifts	University student. Freelance modelling & design	No	No

Table 1. Interviewee Sample

economic transformation over the last decades but continue to face stigmatization and limited opportunities (Keyes, 2014). Primarily, we look at *kathoey* who established relationships with Western men, starting out from an unpromising background of class/status disadvantage, to see how their aspirations and experiences were shaped. Five of our six interviewees fit this profile, the other is a younger generation *kathoey*, a student from the outskirts of Bangkok, whose relationship is less established, and who is not a migrant. This contrasting case helped to define the distinctiveness of the others' cultural script and is cited once only in relation to imaginaries of Western men.

Table 1 documents some basic sample characteristics regarding background, location, age, education, relationship, and family remittances. It also provides letters (e.g., A) that link quotes to interviewees. For the five Isan interviewees, it is notable that they are significantly younger than their Western partners (37.6 years mean), who are elders (71.6 years mean), and receive/have received substantial financial support, and provide some support to families.

SOCIALLY IMAGINING WESTERN MEN

Participants recall 'success stories' of *mia farang,* who gained status and relative wealth through their relationships with Western men. These resonant success stories were a stimulus for participants to seek out Western men to achieve their goals:

> I wanted to have a *farang*[2] husband. The inspiration came from my friend [...] she said a foreign husband takes good care and gives her a lot of money - thousands a day. [...] I just wanted to have a foreign husband to take care of me, I wanted to have a house like the others [...] I wanted to have what others had [...] to have a comfortable life, a house, a car, golden jewelry, and everything that others don't [have]. I just wished I had everything as from [the perspective of] the person who had nothing before, looking at others who were wealthy so that they won't be able to look down on me. (E)

> [I wanted to have a foreign boyfriend] since I was a child as I found other older people having foreign boyfriends [...] they were both *kathoey* and women who were observably wealthy. (C)

Mobility to find employment and then on to possibly meet a foreign partner was a common pathway through which participants ended up in tourist cities. One participant's experience is illustrative:

> When I finished school, I came to work in Bangkok [...] I worked in a cosmetic manufacturing factory [...] after [breaking up with her boyfriend] I went to Pattaya. [...] in the second year of vocational school I trained at FamilyMart [supermarket] in Na Kluea [area of Pattaya]. I thought of working in FamilyMart, but once I was there, it didn't work out, it's not me. Before starting work, I took a ride around town, looking around. [...] I saw some people who were uglier than me and they had a foreign boyfriend. Then why can't I also have a foreign

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2   *Farang* is a Thai colloquial word for Westerners.

boyfriend? My friend at the old bar told me about going out with customers and getting 5,000 Baht, 6,000 Baht. Why is it so easy? I wanted to have money like them. If I was lucky, I would have money like them. (A)

A person who felt she was "a girl born in the wrong body" since childhood, the participant underlines the importance of striving for potential material improvement as a key motivation in her desire to meet a foreign man.

However, the social imaginaries about Western men that prompt *kathoey* to take this path are not just economic motivations. First, participants express imaginings about Western male values and modernity that they believe would make it more likely to find acceptance for their gender identity with a foreign man. They describe Western men as more tolerant because they are "taught to love each other with respect, regardless of sexuality" (B). Thai men instead are described as financially irresponsible, exploitative ("just looking for someone who can support him" [D]), treating *kathoey* as a "minor wife" (C), and prejudiced believing that *kathoey* are "not normal" (B). Relationships between Thai men and *kathoey* are not easily accepted within heteronormative social circles, a point made by the youngest 22-year-old participant: "We're a lady boy, so we must have a foreign boyfriend" (F). Older ones recounted how, when younger, they were forced to break up with their Thai boyfriends to not bring shame on the families. The strong social exclusionary pressures of society push *kathoey* towards investing belief in assumed tolerant characteristics of a Western partner. For example, a 40-year-old person who had full gender reassignment surgery at 23, claims that Western men see a *kathoey* as an individual in her own rights, a 'lover', not defined by a stigmatizing idea of her gender identity: "In Thai culture, transsexuality is clearly stigmatized [...] we are not viewed as *kathoey* by foreigners. They see us as their lovers" (B). The quotation reflects the participant's romanticized view of Western men, which nevertheless is part of the cultural script that stimulates fantasies of possibilities for a different type of life being *kathoey*.

SEEKING GENDER AFFIRMATION

Participants see relationships with Western men as an important potential vehicle to affirm their gender. They talk about how their partners, who identify as heterosexuals, are attracted by their femininity and that they can affirm their gender through this relationship without being questioned: "He liked me as a lady. He liked that I dressed up beautifully and that I was looking cute. He knew I'm a ladyboy, but he was able to accept it and always complimented me that I looked beautiful" (E).

Some recount how their Western partner encouraged them to explicitly express their femininity as a core element of their relationship. For example, one person's Austrian partner paid for her breast implants and she is encouraged to spend time on her looks when he is in Pattaya: "If I have an appointment with [partner] at 8 pm, at 5 pm I'll start to shower and wash my hair. I have to spend time with makeup and trying on clothes and drying my hair" (A).

A relationship with a Western man can create a space for gender affirmation and this emotional and psychological support can have positive effects on a *kathoey's* self-identity and wellbeing. It can allow *kathoey* to "live like a common couple" (D). It

is interesting to note that a number of the relationships in our sample were monogamous and without sexual activity. This can be attributed partly to Western men being much older, but also indicates that the relationship is built emotionally on more than sex, despite being largely viewed as sex work by the outside world.

In some cases, relationships with Westerners can also serve as cover for long-term intimate relationships with a Thai man, relatively concealed from the scrutiny of mainstream society. This is possible logistically because Western partners are often away for long periods. One participant (C), a 33-year-old *kathoey*, has been in an intimate relationship with a Thai man for 11 years. They live together in Pattaya when the participant's Western partner is in New Zealand. The participant actively negotiates multiple relations to sustain this arrangement that allows for a double gender affirmation. The New Zealander believes that the Thais are friends living as "brothers" (C), who work together to launch a bar he bought in Pattaya. The participant organized a traditional wedding with the New Zealander back in the home village of Surin and plans to "take care of him" (C) when he retires permanently to Thailand. The participant has also married the Thai partner in a traditional wedding ceremony, but he has to "accept and go along with" (C) the arrangements in exchange for security and the prospect of a future together:

> Q: How does your Thai boyfriend feel about you having a foreign boyfriend?
>
> A: He's OK with it. We have agreed that we will not leave each other behind. We will stay together and improve our lives (C).

ASPIRING TO UPWARDS SOCIAL MOBILITY

Aspirations for long-term security and climbing the social ladder is a core driver underpinning participants' relationships with Westerners. Four participants receive a monthly allowance ranging between THB 10,000-40,000 (ca. € 250-1,000). At the higher end, this is just less than one-and-a-half times the national average monthly income per household (THB 26,900 as of 2016) (National Statistics Office, no date). In addition, two participants have their rent and bills paid for, and the participants recount receiving gifts, money, and even support to set up their own businesses. All report having a better quality of life since being with their Western partner:

> I now have my own house to live in when I go back home, unlike before when I used to live in a small hut with my aunt in the farm or at the small hut with my mother […] now I have a proper house to live, a private bedroom, a kitchen and I don't have to depend on my relatives. (E)

Participants are clear that such life-chances would be impossible with a Thai man, for whom they would be a source of money: "money is an important factor for a Thai man to be with a *kathoey*" (B). However, allowances and gifts from Westerners also come with strings attached and elements of social control when their spending is checked. One person recalls having to prove money was spent as agreed: "He got me the first gold chain that weighed one ounce, then I took a picture of it and sent it

to him as a proof" (E). *Kathoey* seem largely willing to put up with these controlling practices for the bigger good of a better life. This is made easier because the Western men are away much of the time.

Kathoey seek not only immediate material gains but also future financial security from a relationship. As legal same-sex marriage is impossible in Thailand, some push to become beneficiaries of their partner's will, to have legal rights to their partner's assets, and secure a future after his death. Subjects have relatively little agency in this decision because it depends on their partner's wealth, own family, and commitment to the relationship. While one participant was included in the Westerner's will, others mobilized alternative strategies to gain long-term access to his wealth, for example, by having property or a business legally in their name.

Some partners had only limited means, however, and could provide only immediate financial support, meaning that some participants developed other ways to save up for the future: "I should do lots of savings to take care of myself when I get older because I will not have my own children to take care of myself as others" (D). D, a 32-year-old *kathoey* who had feminine appearances until 26 years old, describes managing such a relationship in her relationship with an 81-year-old Australian. They are "living happily together" (D) when he is in Thailand three times a year. This person (D) receives a monthly allowance that is enough to pay for living expenses and to support parents, but cannot save enough to set up a small business that is a dream, and still occasionally prostitutes to supplement income and aspirations.

Beyond the material trappings and wealth, it is clear that having a Western partner adds value and some degree of social acceptance to being *kathoey*, according to the participants. Some report being looked up to by others because of their relationship to a Western man: "One of the pros is that when I go out, I feel proud that I have a foreign boyfriend. It looks good in society. It's accepted" (A). "It's about the social factor. It looks better when you have a foreign husband" (E). They also report becoming role models for younger *kathoey:*

> The young *kathoey* in my hometown, they ask me "Ma'm' how do we get a foreign husband? I want to have a foreign husband like you" [...] Most of the younger *kathoey* in Pattaya call me 'Ma'm', they call me 'Madam' because I have [partner] who supports me. I have a car and things. (A)

While Western partners raise status among peers in the tourist zone, it is harder to transfer this status to mainstream society, which stigmatizes these types of relationships. Also, new-found wealth can be a source of envy and exploitation, because it transforms relations with friends. One person, a 30-year-old *kathoey* living in Pattaya, has experienced increased pressure to provide for her friends, something that she had to learn how to manage:

> Before, I used to party. I thought about it. If I party a lot with my friends, friends will think of me as "Madam". "Madam, buy us beer." Everywhere I go, I have to pay every day. It's not right. If I go out, I just lose – lose my health, lose my money. If I don't treat my friends, I also lose my friends. (A)

Her natal family also expects to benefit financially from the relationship, which is why she negotiates a balancing act between her sister's requests for money and worries that her Western partner will see her as a money-grabber. She loves her Austrian partner and does not want to come across as if she is only after his money:

> If she [sister] has a problem, she calls me. I told her that if she wants to talk about money, she has to tell me in advance. Not call me today and want the money right away. I told her that if she has financial problems, she has to call me a week in advance because I need time to talk to [partner]. I have to explain the reason to [partner]. When she calls, I can't explain to [partner] right way and get the money right away. It doesn't work like that… The money is not with me. I have to explain to [partner] for him to agree. I can't tell him that I want the money now. Give it to me. Give it to me. Then he will think that I only want his money. I don't want foreigners to think that I only want their money. I also have good feelings and love for him. We take care of each other. (A)

Respondents are aware that their acceptance from Thai society is limited to specific social spaces and places, the nonheteronormative enclaves or 'scenes' in tourist-zones. Such places become a "second home" (D), with networks and communities of people like them. Yet, even in these places, they sometimes face stigmatization from Thais, which again underpins the strong heteronormative constraints of Thai society. One person in a relationship with a 70-year-old Swiss medical doctor, recounts her experience of going out in Phuket with her partner:

> If we want to eat out [in Phuket], we will go to good restaurant with qualified waiters. They may look at us but they will not talk or behave negatively about us, at least while we are there. Differently to some places, we can be looked down and I can see lots of questions into their eyes such as what career I do and how we met. […] It is difficult for people in other cities to accept who we are. Even in Phuket, we still need to go to good places in order to avoid being judged about our relationship by people around there. Let's say, if we go together at Bangla[3], I will be looked down as they thought I got the big fish as referred to my boyfriend. This is how most of Thai people view us. (B)

She feels that "most Thai people" look down on her and assume she is a prostitute out with a client. Her story illustrates the participants' persistently liminal position and precarious conditional status in Thai society, even after attaining material goals.

SEEKING FAMILY RECOGNITION AND ACCEPTANCE

Participants express a genuine desire to find acceptance and recognition for their gender identity within their family. To this end, some have developed strategies to buy back materially and morally into the family, a core motivation for partnering a Western man in the first place. Monthly remittances are important in this respect and those who received regular support from their partners made significant remittances

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3   Bangla Road, known as Patong Walking Street, is the centre of Phuket's nightlife scene catering for foreigners.

(see Table 1), ranging from THB 3,000 to 15,000 per month (ca €77-390). At the higher end, this is close to the average monthly household income for the Northeastern Region (ca THB 21,000 as of 2016) (National Statistics Office, no date). They enable their natal family to have "a fair life" (D) while demonstrating filial piety, and gaining status as dutiful children:

> If I have a comfortable life, my parents should also have a comfortable life. I don't want to be the wife of a foreigner and forget my roots. Don't let other people put a mask on you. You have to be yourself. You should make your family comfortable. (A)

If a Western partner is willing to recognize a *kathoey*'s obligations to natal family and support them, this can importantly impact on acceptance by the family and home village. A person in a relationship for seven years with her Austrian partner describes how they are now accepted as a genuine couple in her hometown:

> He's an easy-going person. He can eat Northeastern food. [...] When he goes to my hometown, I cook for him and take him out to different places in our province. I show him around. In the morning, we drink coffee at my friend's shop. I invite my mom to walk along the Mekong River. In the evening, I buy groceries to cook at home. (A)

Her partner's regular support to her family has meant that he is fully accepted by them:

> Yes, they accept him. When we go back home, my parents tie holy thread on our wrists. It's Thai tradition. He is deeply impressed and touched. When my grandfather was still alive, we were about to drive back, my grandfather found holy thread in the house and ran out to knock on the car window. He told us to extend our arms out and he tied our wrists with holy thread. Five minutes after we drove out, [partner] cried. He was deeply touched. He said that when he was married to his Thai wife, her family never did this for him. They only asked for money. They only talked about money. He said that my family never talked about money with him. He felt overwhelmed. (A)

A traditional marriage ceremony can be symbolically important in this respect. Another person's family blessed the union with the Western partner after he agreed to pay "THB 50,000 in cash and two Bhat gold[4]" (C) to the parents in a dowry. The traditional wedding publicly validated the relationship and importantly the participant's gender identity in the village: "At the beginning I was not accepted by the neighbors. Yet, after my relatives participated in the wedding ceremony and understood our relationship, they are happy to see us happy" (C).

Participants are sometimes not able to live up to local people's high financial expectations about having a Western partner. When their allowance is modest and they can only remit amounts that cover basic expenses, they receive less acceptance

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4   One Bhat gold weighs ca 15g.

and can be seen in a bad light by people in the village. For example, one person in this situation recounts how the family's neighbors have been gossiping negatively: "Some people didn't understand why I am still not having a luxurious life even though I have a foreign boyfriend. They see my mother still living in the same house" (D).

Westerners do not always accept the Thai notion of filial duty, applying instead Western individualist values and norms. This can create tensions. One participant, who lives mostly as an effeminate man, says that the 78-year-old British partner "loves me but doesn't take my family well" (E). Nonetheless, this person still makes remittances to family every month, concealed from the partner, which demonstrates the strength of the internalized social pressures to meet expectations of filial piety that have been raised by knowledge of the relationship:

> I already told my family that I had a boyfriend, but you know how the villagers are, right? So when they saw him, they got excited. I had already thought that I would not allow myself to feel embarrassed so when I went home, I got my relatives some money from the little savings that I had. The little savings were from the small change he used to give me to buy some stuff. But I can't let him know when I give money to my relatives as he doesn't take things well and wouldn't be happy about it otherwise. It's hard for me to send back home as well with my mom alone is also very difficult. He only takes good care of me for everything I want to have, I want to eat etc. So when I go home, I give money to my mother and to my relatives without him knowing about it. Even after we had a party at home, when I buy snacks for the kids, he would say something that the money he gave me is for myself and not for my family. He is very difficult with my family and doesn't take anyone except me. (E)

This indicates the degree to which recognition within the family and social acceptance from the village is conditional, and dependent on expectations for provision, that are driven and significantly raised by being in relationship with a foreigner.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Here we have tried to present a snapshot of the cultural script through which a generation of *kathoey* from poor rural backgrounds in Isan aspired to make a social space for living a *kathoey* life by establishing an enduring relationship with a significantly older Western man. On one side, relationships with Western men (in contrast to Thai men) were seen as opening up chances for gender affirmation and love, and thereby legitimated and made possible a nonheteronormative lifestyle, albeit one sometimes confined to tourist-zone scenes. On the other, relationships with Western men stigmatized *kathoey* as prostitutes (notwithstanding sex often not being a component of the emotional bond), thereby creating barriers to social acceptance within Thai society, not least in the home-town village where acceptance was strongly dependent on familial provision.

Facing a hostile, discriminatory environment from mainstream heteronormative society, people in our sample were able to achieve an important degree of gender recognition and social advancement, according to their own evaluations. Of course, they were selected as people in established relationships, so we should not raise their

experiences to a general level. There are most likely *kathoey* from the same origin and cohort who were unable to achieve similar goals, although they most likely aspired to the same cultural script. Indeed, the resonance of this cultural script can in part be attributed to the highly limited opportunities for *kathoey* from this cohort to achieve aspirations by other means, due to the high levels of transphobic and class/status discrimination. Even among a sample of success stories, the high challenges of balancing acts at the interface between the partnership with a foreign man, peers in the tourist zone, and family back in the village, demanded resourceful and continued hard work by *kathoey* to keep their ambitions afloat.

Although their relationships with Western men are structurally underpinned by economic support, it is clear they stand socially for much more. Subjects viewed their negotiated exchanges with their Western partners through a lens of opportunities, but their aspirations within the relationship strongly included needs for intimacy and emotional support from a caring and loving bond. This desire for affection and well-being was mostly achieved and not based on sexual relations, which in most cases had ceased. Also, the public visibility of being *kathoey* in an enduring relationship with a Western man provided a degree of gender validation in the face of mainstream heteronormative society that was seen as unrealizable from relationships with Thai men in Thai society. Even the opportunity to gain merit by 'buying back' into the family by financial remittances has a strong emotional component in that it required family recognition and acceptance of a *kathoey*-foreigner relationship, something parents were in some cases willing to embrace and ratify in the local community through wedding rituals. This is transformative of local understandings and norms for socially acceptable relationships, even if one takes the cynical view that acceptance is based on financial contributions. We think there is a more subtle process of social change taking place, whereby *kathoey* agency, empowered through their relationships, challenges and transforms established norms and values.

Ultimately though, even materially successful *kathoey* remain in a liminal, precarious position within Thai society. Especially at the beginning of a relationship, the asymmetric power balance leaves *kathoey* in a position of dependency on their partners, who could leave them at any moment, with few strings attached. They remain in a weaker position than *mia farang*, because of their relative lack of access to rights through legal marriage in Thailand: same-sex marriage is barred and so is changing gender from that attributed at birth. This is perhaps why *kathoey* invest so deeply emotionally into Westerner relationships to build lasting bonds while also trying to materialize tangible assets through gifts and property ownership. In some cases, this high emotional investment can be a self-fulfilling prophecy that constitutes a caring and loving partnership. But it can also explain why some *kathoey* accept social controlling behavior by their Western partners, while keeping alive their aspirations for gender realization and buying back morally and financially into their families.

It needs noting that the 'cultural script' we have unpacked is specific to the class/status background of a generation of *kathoey* from Isan. The exception in our sample, a younger student from a middle-class background on the Bangkok periphery, aspired to different social and gender affirmation goals: to migrate and marry her Canadian partner in Canada, where civil partnerships are legally binding, which would provide significant access to individual rights and resources through the partnership. While

the cultural script we discuss holds for the sizeable generation of Isan *kathoey* who moved to tourist cities in search of Western men, clearly younger generations from wealthier backgrounds aspire to cultural scripts that are beyond what the people central to our research considered realizable.

Overall, our research on enduring relationships shows that, despite power asymmetries within couples and a structural underpinning of economic motives in seeking a relationship with a foreigner, aspirations for a life with affection, (non-sexual) intimacy, and gender affirmation matter a great deal in shaping these *kathoey* lives. We think that depictions of *kathoey*-foreigner relationships as sex-work or 'sugar-daddying' – stereotypes that resonate in the social world, but that have also informed sociological approaches – fail to do justice to the subject matter and lives they represent. Here we have tried modestly to provide some sociological insight into the way some *kathoey* view the social world of which they are part. By basing our study on an interpretation of their expressed aspirations and views of their negotiated exchanges with their partners, we hope to have demonstrated that emotions are a central component of this *kathoey* cultural script. We think that it is important, if challenging, to try and find ways to study these special types of cross-border relationships produced by globalization and increasing mobility within structured North/South inequalities within their own terms rather than through a reductive lens of economic determinism.

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DISCLOSURE

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Thai Immigrant Service-based Entrepreneurship in the UK: Mixed Embeddedness, Superdiversity, and Combined Ethnic and Non-Ethnic Capital

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This paper examines Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in the UK, drawing on 17 interviews with Thai migrants in Brighton, East Sussex. It explores how Thai immigrants from different socioeconomic backgrounds and migration pathways mobilize ethnic and non-ethnic forms of capital in their entrepreneurial activities. Thai immigrants constitute a relatively new, small, but internally diverse migrant population in the UK, with female marriage migrants dominating the Thai migrant population in the past two decades. The findings of this study reveal that Thai migrants tend to own small-scale businesses or provide personal services in three sectors: cleaning and care work, beauty and massage, and food and catering. In their interaction with opportunity structures in the UK, Thai restaurant and massage entrepreneurs mobilize the exotic notion of "Thai-ness" to add value to their services catering to local British customers.

Keywords: Forms of Capital; Immigrant Entrepreneurship; Mixed Embeddedness; Service-Based Entrepreneurship; Thai Migrants

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores Thai businesses in Brighton, UK, through the lens of immigrant entrepreneurship. The literature on immigrant entrepreneurship often examines factors that shape migrants' entrepreneurial activities, especially the dynamics between macro-level structures in the host country and migrants' human agency (Kloosterman, 2010; Ram et al., 2008). In the UK, the Thai migrant population is a relatively new and small migrant group with a distinctive demographic pattern. Thai migration to the UK has been dominated by female marriage migration.

While ethnic social capital has been emphasized in studies of immigrant entrepreneurship, being married to British citizens or residents plays an important role in Thai migrants' entrepreneurial projects. Internal diversity among Thai migrants in the UK in terms of social class standing, educational attainment, time of arrival, and migration pathways contributes to the complex ways in which different forms of capital – financial, social, and human-cultural capital (Nee & Sanders, 2001) – have been mobilized among Thai migrant entrepreneurs. This paper pays particular attention to the combined mobilization of ethnic and non-ethnic forms of social capital among Thai immigrant entrepreneurs.

The current study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured, in-depth interviews and ethnography as methods to examine Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in Brighton. A total of 17 face-to-face interviews were conducted along with on-site observations of Thai immigrants' business venues. Leaning on Kloosterman's (2010) mixed embeddedness framework, this paper seeks to identify the migration context and socio-economic environment that shape Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in Brighton and to analyze entrepreneurial practices in which ethnic and non-ethnic forms of social capital are mobilized among migrants of diverse backgrounds and migration trajectories.

Thai immigrants' businesses in Brighton concentrate in the feminized 'high-touch' sectors of food, massage, and cleaning, catering to the mainstream non-ethnic market. Two groups of Thai migrants who mobilize non-ethnic forms of social capital to gain access to mainstream resources that add advantage to their enterprises are those with high educational attainment and those who are married to British citizens and residents.

This paper contributes to the study of Thai migration to Europe by highlighting migrants' incorporation in the host country's economy, challenging the prevalent stereotype of Thai migrants in Europe as economically dependent foreign wives or sex workers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FORMS OF CAPITAL AND MIXED EMBEDDEDNESS IN IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

This paper draws on the literature of immigrant entrepreneurship, generally understood as the undertaking of entrepreneurial activities by immigrants (Dabic et al., 2020), especially those who move from developing countries to advanced economies (Kloosterman, 2010). Studies of immigrant entrepreneurship have shown shifting interrelations between migrants' agency and structural constraints in the host society. The concept of "mixed-embeddedness" by Kloosterman (2010) pays particular attention to the ways in which the business environment in the destination country shapes business activities and prospects of immigrant entrepreneurs. Kloosterman (2010) argues that immigrants' entrepreneurial projects are embedded in specific temporal and spatial frames and that immigrant entrepreneurs operate within specific legal and socio-economic contexts (at the national, city, and neighborhood levels) that create differential opportunity structures. Conversely, earlier studies of immigrant and ethnic minority enterprise have focused on migrants' strategic resource management, especially the mobilization of ethnic social networks, in setting up and operating businesses in host societies (e.g., Flap et al., 2000; Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003; Nee & Sanders, 2001). Since its conceptualization more than two decades ago, the mixed embeddedness framework

continues to be influential in the studies of immigrant entrepreneurship. Intersecting with scholarly work on business and migration, this framework has been used along with other important concepts in migration studies, such as superdiversity (Barberis & Solano, 2018; Kloosterman et al., 2016; Ram et al., 2011; Sepulveda et al., 2011) and transnationality (Solano et al., 2022; Yamamura & Lasalle, 2020; You & Zhou, 2019). Migrants' entrepreneurial activities have been analyzed against socio-cultural dimensions, such as gender (Wahlbeck, 2018; You & Zhou, 2021; Vershinina et al., 2019) and generation (Selcuk & Suwala, 2020; Vershinina et al., 2011). This study of Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in Brighton contributes to this literature illustrating how the feminization of migration caused by gendered global entanglements between sending and receiving countries, and gendered stereotypes of Thai migrants constitute a context in which Thai immigrant entrepreneurship has evolved.

The "forms of capital" concept was originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) as he proposed that individuals and groups invest in, accumulate, and gain profits not only in the form of economic capital but also in more disguised forms of capital, such as 1) social capital – a membership in a group or network; and 2) cultural capital – embodied in forms such as language skills and institutionalized in the form of academic credentials. Central to Bourdieu's "forms of capital" is the dynamic in which one form of capital can be converted to another and vice versa, and the fact that individuals are not equal players in the economic field due to differential access to and accumulation of different forms of capital. In other words, Bourdieu stresses both human agency in mobilizing/converting forms of capital and structural constraints in which these forms of capital are not equally available to individuals and groups, leading to the reproduction of inequality. Bourdieu's concept has been adopted in different fields of research. In studying Thailand's informal tourism sector, Çakmak (2019) illustrates how enterprises of different sizes and stages of development mobilize different forms of capital. Trupp (2015) applies the concept of mixed embeddedness and social capital in studying Akha ethnic minority street vendors in Thailand's tourist areas. In the field of migration studies, Nee and Sanders (2001) proposed the 'forms of capital' model to study immigrant incorporation into the host country's economy. They contend that the forms of capital immigrants arrive with and subsequently accumulate shape the split of immigrants into different labor market trajectories. Nee and Sanders' (2001) forms of capital consist of financial capital, social capital, and human-cultural capital. Social capital usually refers to individuals' personal empowerment and capacity to gain access to scarce resources by virtue of their membership in social networks or institutions (Nederveen Pieterse, 2003, p. 31; Ram et al., 2008, p. 429). Nee and Sanders (2001) pay particular attention to the social capital embodied in the family. They observed that "newly arrived immigrants rely on social capital to reduce the costs involved in settling in a new country. They often turn to their extended family and ethnic group to get general information about hiring practices and labor market conditions" (Nee & Sanders, 2001, p. 390).

Social capital in the literature of immigrant entrepreneurship tends to emphasize family and ethnic networks as an important source of resources when access to mainstream resources is limited (Flap et al., 2000; Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003; Nee & Sanders, 2001). Following Putnam (2000), social capital in studies of immigrant economic performance can be divided into two types – bonding and bridging social capital. Capital

gained by reaching within a closed, tight-knit group (family and ethnic community) is referred to as bonding social capital, while capital drawn from cross-cutting ties across identity and status groups is described as bridging social capital (Lancee, 2010).

Being part of a new migrant group in the UK, Thai immigrant entrepreneurs challenge assumptions about the role of immigrants' families in the development of immigrant entrepreneurship. Mixed marriage rather than co-ethnic marriage is the norm among Thai migrants in the UK, with a high proportion of female marriage migrants who migrate to join their British citizen husbands. For many Thai entrepreneurs in the UK, family support does not necessarily signify bonding social capital within the Thai ethnic community. On the contrary, support from British husbands constitutes bridging social capital as well as access to non-ethnic financial and cultural capital. Entrepreneurial practices of many Thai immigrants thus represent inter-cultural enterprises as described by Nederveen Pieterse (2003), mobilizing both ethnic and non-ethnic forms of capital.

IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE UK'S CONTEXT OF SUPERDIVERSITY

There has been a growing research interest on immigrant entrepreneurship in the UK in the context of "superdiversity" and the lightly-regulated business environment. Coined by Steven Vertovec (2007), superdiversity refers to the new complexity of migration in key destinations, such as the UK, with arrivals of "new, small and scattered multiple-origins, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants" (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). Sepulveda et al. (2011) posit that the lightly-regulated business environment in the UK is favorable for the arrival and development of immigrant entrepreneurship, particularly as migrant populations have become more diverse. Jones et al. (2014), however, argue that although migrant populations in the UK are more diverse, they are still concentrated in traditional migrant business sectors, or what Kloosterman (2010) categorizes as "vacancy chain" and "personal services" in the post-industrial society. These sectors are characterized by low value, labor intensiveness, and high competition, and thus have limited opportunities for mobility. This line of research points out that the neoliberal market and the lightly-regulated business environment in the UK encourage quantity rather than quality of migrant businesses (Barrett et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2014).

For many of the recent arrivals, the nature of their entrepreneurial activity will be acutely conditioned by political-economic factors such as immigration status, labor market experiences, relations with the local community, and the need to compete with longer-established entrepreneurial minorities (Ram et al., 2008, p. 428). Internal diversity among migrants from the same country of origin contributes to differential opportunity structures and access to resources in entrepreneurial projects (Fresnoza-Flot & Pécoud, 2007; Vershinina et al., 2011).

Given the distinctive characteristic of Thai migration to the UK – highly feminized and dominated by marriage migration, and yet internally diverse – this study explores the constraints and opportunities faced by Thai migrant entrepreneurs from different socio-economic backgrounds and with different migration pathways. The findings reveal that although Thai migrants come from different socio-economic backgrounds in Thailand, they face similar constraints in the UK labor market and

are subject to the same negative gendered and ethnic stereotypes. Migrants with high education and professional skills in Thailand experience downward mobility in their occupational opportunities in the UK. Migration to the UK brings Thais from different socio-economic backgrounds on the same level in terms of occupation opportunities – being self-employed, working part-time, working in low-skilled occupations, or engaging in the same kinds of Thai businesses in the UK, particularly in the food and massage businesses.

Many Thai businesses cater to non-Thai mainstream customers by capitalizing on the image of Thai-ness that Western people are exposed to through the tourism industry (Sunanta, 2020). Selling Thainess is most prominent in the Thai food and massage sectors where authentic Thai culture and tradition are invoked to attract non-Thai customers. These Thai business niches capitalize on and perpetuate gendered and ethnic stereotypes of Thais as being good at 'touch' and 'taste'.

Although engaging in the same Thai business niches, Thai migrants with different socio-economic backgrounds and migration pathways mobilize different forms of capital to gain access to resources for their entrepreneurial projects. This article will focus on the use of ethnic and non-ethnic social capital among Thai migrant entrepreneurs and its implications. To many Thai immigrant entrepreneurs, ethnic networks are helpful for hiring, funding, and providing knowledge about business possibilities. In addition, non-ethnic social capital is notably mobilized by two groups of Thai migrants: those who are married to British citizens or residents and those who have high levels of education. The data show that non-ethnic social capital benefits Thai migrant entrepreneurs. As illustrated by Ram et al. (2003), operating within the very limited enclosure of bonding social capital is to put a brake on entrepreneurial growth and diversification. Internal exclusiveness can actually exclude entrepreneurs from external possibilities (Ram et al., 2008, p. 430). On the other hand, as will be demonstrated in the findings of this study, bridging social capital grants access to mainstream resources – finance, knowledge of local business regulations and marketing strategies, and a larger and more diverse labor pool.

Specific characteristics of Thai migration to the UK should be taken into consideration when analyzing Thai immigrant entrepreneurship. The following section will describe the history of mobilities from Thailand to the UK and how these developments contribute to a feminized and heterogenous Thai migrant community.

THAI MIGRATION TO THE UK: FEMINIZATION AND HETEROGENEITY

The formation of the Thai migrant community in the UK is a relatively new development. The size of the Thai migrant population in the UK is small compared to migrant groups from countries with a longer history of migration to the UK, such as those in South Asia and the African Caribbean. The migration flow from Thailand to the UK has distinctive characteristics: It is highly feminized with 72% of the 16,256 Thai-born population in the UK being female according to the 2001 census (Sims, 2008). Between 2001 to 2006, the majority of Thai nationals naturalized as UK citizens were marriage migrants, and only one-third of citizenship grants occurred through residence (Sims, 2008). The feminization of Thai migration and the high proportion of Thai marriage migrants in the UK are part of the cross-cultural marriages between

Thai women and Western men from Europe, Australia, and North America that started in the 1970s and reached its peak in the 2000s.

The Western-Thai transnational marriage phenomenon has its root in the Cold War geopolitics and the development of Thailand into a destination for international sex tourism since the 1960s (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2019; Statham et al., 2020). According to research on Thai woman-Western man cross-cultural marriage and migration, Thai women from working class, rural backgrounds in the impoverished Isan region overrepresent Thai marriage migrants in Western countries (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2019; Ruenkaew, 2009; Sunanta & Angeles, 2013). This is particularly true for the older generation of Thai wives in Europe. More recent research found that younger generations of Thai female marriage migrants in Europe tend to have professional backgrounds and higher education compared to those who arrived 20-30 years ago (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Chuenglertsiri, 2020; Sinsuwan, 2018). The shift could be attributed to more restricted migration regulations in the receiving countries[1] as well as changes in the Thai demography, with younger generations receiving more education than their parents. Even with higher education, many Thais experience blocked opportunities in Thailand, and migration to higher-income countries represents better life chances (Kitcharoen, 2007; Statham et al., 2020). In light of the restricted migration regime in the UK[2], marriage is a more accessible – if not the only – migration path for many Thais (Chuenglertsiri, 2020).

Thai society is highly stratified, with a wide income gap between the rich and the poor. Since the 20th century, the UK has been a destination for the Thai elite and privileged classes who seek Western/international education. Traveling to and residing in the UK was once a privilege for a few upper-class Thais. Since the 1990s, however, Thai migration to the UK has been dominated by marriage migration of Thai women, many of whom come from modest backgrounds in Thailand. The history of migration from Thailand to the UK is intertwined with ingrained social status hierarchies in Thailand that have created a heterogenous Thai migrant population in the UK – a diverse group whose members do not necessarily identify with each other in terms of class and social standing. Even among Thai marriage migrants who have settled down in the UK, there have been social cleavages. A study of Thai women married to white American men in the US by Supatkul (2020) reveals a process of intra-ethnic othering in which class-privileged Thai wives express contempt towards and disassociate themselves from rural and lower-class background, co-ethnic marriage migrants. Thai women in cross-cultural, intimate relationships with white, Western men face negative gendered and classed stereotypes in both their home and destination countries. In Thailand, women from rural backgrounds who are in intimate partnerships with white, Western men are colloquially called *mia farang*, a term that conjures the quasi-prostitute identity of Isan rental wives of American military men during the Vietnam War (Sunanta, 2013).

The growth of the marriage migration trend in the 1990s and the 2000s takes place alongside more traditional mobilities of upper-class Thais to the UK for educational

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1   The promulgation of language and citizenship test requirements makes it more difficult for foreign nationals to migrate through marriage and become British citizens.

2   Since April 2016, employment-based migration for non-EU citizens to the UK is restricted to 'high-skilled' labor defined by an annual salary of at least GBP 35,000.

purposes. Among English speaking countries, the UK has been the top destination for higher education for Thai students. According to the British Council Thailand, there were 6,880 Thai students in UK universities in the year 2018/2019 (UK still popular among uni students, 2021). Some of the upper-class Thai students changed their status to permanent residents through marriage or employment. Employment-based migrants only constitute a minority of the Thai migrant population in the UK, particularly after April 2016 when employment-based migration from non-EU countries was only possible for high-skilled labor categories with a minimum annual salary of GBP 35,000. A relatively small migrant group with high internal diversity, Thai migrants in the UK contribute to what Vertovec (2007) describes as superdiversity.

Migration patterns of Thai migrants in the UK shape Thai migrant entrepreneurship in the destination country. Given the prominence of family reunification, particularly cross-national marriage with British citizens/residents, as the basis of migration, the majority of Thai migrants did not arrive in the UK with the primary intention to set up a business. Self-employment and entrepreneurship are the livelihood choice Thai migrants make as they settle down in the UK to form/join a family. Arriving as marriage/family reunification migrants implies that migrants are geographically dispersed. They are not always part of an ethnic enclave, living in proximity with other Thais – a setting that would normally maximize ethnic social capital in immigrant entrepreneurship. Being married to British citizens/residents constitutes a different kind of social capital not found in entrepreneurship in other migrant groups. This paper will explore how internal diversity among Thai migrants – educational and social class backgrounds, having or not having a British citizen spouse – influences immigrant entrepreneurship.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 17 Thai entrepreneurs in Brighton, a seaside city in the southeast of England with a population of 273,369 people according to the 2011 census (Brighton & Hope City Council, n.d.). Brighton was chosen as the research site because of existing networks the researcher has with the Thai community in the city. Although the Thai community in Brighton is not as large and diverse as in London, most of its members know each other, forming a sense of community. Brighton is the business center for smaller towns in the region and a bustling tourism destination as a seaside resort only 76 km from London. In terms of diversity, Brighton and Hove[3] has a higher percentage of white population (both British and non-British) at 89.1% compared to the England average of 85.5%. Asians constitute 4.1% of the Brighton and Hove population compared to the England average of 7.8%. The Thai immigrants are a part of the 11,280 Asian population in the city (Becoming an anti-racist city, 2022).

Recruitment criteria were set to include people who were born in Thailand, own or used to own a business in the UK, or are self-employed. Access to informants was gained with the help of local gate keepers in the Thai community and through personal networks. The snowball method was used to reach more informants. The researcher

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3   Brighton and its adjacent city, Hove, form a single jurisdiction under the council of Brighton and Hove.

spent approximately six months in Brighton between 2016 to 2019 and participated in the Thai community's activities in the city. She knows some informants personally and participated in social activities such as dinners, house visits, and going to Thai temples with them. Most of the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2019. The interviews were conducted in Thai and were recorded with the permission of the informants. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English. The names of the informants were changed to protect their identities. Although the sampling size was not large, saturated qualitative data were reached and patterns of entrepreneurial practices among Thai migrants established. An ethnography of Thai restaurants and massage salons was also conducted, where the overall atmosphere, the ways in which food and services were delivered, and the interactions between servers and customers as well as among servers were observed and recorded in the form of fieldnotes.

Most studies on immigrant entrepreneurship focus on businesses that are in operation (e.g., Fresnoza-Flot & Pécoud, 2007; Ram et al., 2008; Vershinina et al., 2011; Webster & Haandrikman, 2017). In this study, I also included participants who used to own businesses but no longer do so. This method sheds light on the challenges faced by Thai immigrant entrepreneurs and their decisions to stop their businesses. This strategy offers a more complete picture of immigrants' entrepreneurial experiences.

Informants were asked for their biographical and migration history, post-migration experience in the UK, and entrepreneurial activities. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen to encourage informants to construct their own narratives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study follows the interpretivist approach in which themes are induced from the interview narratives (Klag & Langley, 2013). What emerged from the interview data are the feminization of Thai migration in the UK through the domination of marriage migration, the concentration of Thai migrants' businesses in food, massage, and cleaning, the diverse socio-economic backgrounds and migration channels among Thai migrants, and the ways these socio-economic factors and migration statuses shape migrants' mobilization of ethnic and non-ethnic capitals in their entrepreneurial projects.

INFORMANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The biographical backgrounds and migration trajectories of the research subjects were compatible with the overall picture of Thai migration to the UK, reflecting feminization, the domination of marriage migration, and internal diversity. Informants' age ranged from 33 to 70. Time spent in the UK ranged from 10 to 31 years. Out of 17 informants, 10 came to the UK through marriage, four arrived as students, two were on employment-based visas, and one arrived as a minor child of a marriage migrant mother. Three informants who first arrived as students changed their status to marriage migrants (see Table 1).

Research respondents were predominantly female (14 out of 17). Both of the employment-based principal migrants were male; they later brought their Thai wives as dependents. In terms of skills and educational backgrounds, five of the informants had only completed primary education. Nine obtained secondary education or vocational certificates. Three of the informants have graduate and postgraduate degrees, one of whom obtained a British MBA.

Name	Gender	Business	Age	Education	Migration Channels	Time in the UK (years)
Sombat	M	Thai kitchen in a pub	55	Vocational	Student, marriage (same sex)	25
Oi	F	Direct sale/multi level marketing	61	Secondary	Marriage	25
Nuan	F	Thai massage	45	Primary	Marriage	10
Pim	F	Thai massage	50	Primary	Marriage	28
Panni	F	Thai massage	48	Secondary	Marriage	13
Tum	F	French market trader	42	Primary	Marriage	11
Sonram	M	Thai kitchen in a pub	36	Secondary, UK	Minor child of a marriage migrant	22
Tan	F	Thai kitchen in a pub	45	Vocational	Student	21
Wan	F	Thai restaurant	39	MA from the UK	Student	19
Su	F	Thai restaurant	35	MA from Thailand	Student	10
Sak	M	Asian grocery store/noodle bar	61	Primary	Employment	31
Ploy	F	Thai restaurant	42	Vocational	Dependent wife of employment-based migrant	17
Nok	F	Cleaning	42	Secondary	Marriage	11
Loi	F	Cleaning	40	Primary	Marriage	15
Dao	F	Hair dresser	33	Vocational	Marriage	11
Dara	F	Thai restaurant	70		Marriage	18
Ann	F	Thai massage	41	BA from Thailand	Student, marriage	13

Table 1. Informants' Demographic Information (author's compilation).

According to the findings, Thai businesses in Brighton fall into three categories: food and catering (8), massage (4), cleaning (2), and others (3). The latter includes a multi-level marketing sales representative, a trader in the French market, and a hair dresser.

SELLING THAI-NESS AND MIXED EMBEDDEDNESS OF THAI IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN BRIGHTON, UK

The findings of this study reveal that most Thai enterprises and forms of self-employment are service-based, in line with Kloosterman's (2010) description of the entrepreneurial sector of "post-industrial, low-skilled migrants" that is flourishing in the context of economically rich, time-poor post-industrial urban cities across the OECD countries. Feminist sociologists observe the same phenomenon in the growing trend of the marketization of care and reproductive work in developed economies and the relegation of this work to immigrants from poorer countries (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004; Hochschild, 2003). Thai service-based immigrant

entrepreneurship in Brighton responds to these opportunities, mobilizing Thai-ness to add value to their services catering to non-Thai, mainstream customers.

Contrary to migrant ethnic enterprises catering to a co-ethnic/migrant community, many Thai businesses in the UK are labeled as Thai to cater to the non-Thai, mainstream population. According to the Thai business owners interviewed, about 80-90% of the customers of Thai restaurants and Thai massage salons are British/European. Thai migrant entrepreneurs report that the customers already have knowledge and pre-conceptions about Thailand, Thai food, and Thai massage through the media or travel to Thailand. Thai migrant entrepreneurs capitalize on the image of Thai-ness in the eyes of Westerners to promote their businesses in the UK. Thai restaurants and massage salons are decorated in Thai themes, using Thai decorative items, such as Thai cloths, wood carvings, and the map and images of Thailand to produce a Thai atmosphere. Dishes on the menu of Thai restaurants are sometimes given exotic and sensual names. A Thai chef in Brighton names the Thai dish *sai-ua* (Lanna style sausage) "One Night Stand in Chiangmai". These Thai businesses are built on and reify the feminized and sensualized images of Thailand and Thai-ness promoted by the tourism industry. In the tourism discourse, Thai-ness is represented as sensual, warm, gentle, and rich in touch and taste (Sunanta, 2020).

In addition, Thai immigrant entrepreneurs deploy cross-cultural knowledge obtained over time in the business to modify Thai services to suit British customers' taste and preference. A cook in the Thai kitchen in a local Brighton pub explains that British customers like their dishes a bit sweet and their curries thick and creamy. Thai curries from her kitchen are thus thicker and creamier than they would normally be in Thailand. She explains that the British had been familiar with thick and creamy Indian curries before they experienced Thai food. Similarly, Thai massage entrepreneurs learned that most British customers prefer relaxation massage over heavy, deep tissue massage preferred by Thai customers, and manage their business accordingly. As Thai businesses cater mainly to British customers, cross-cultural knowledge constitutes an important resource in Thai migrant entrepreneurship.

Thai immigrant entrepreneurs' conversion of cultural capital – knowledge about local customers' preference and Westerners' attraction to the exotic notion of Thai-ness – into a business advantage is conditioned by a structural context. Faced with a limited access to professional positions in the local labor market, Thai migrants with higher education from Thailand are drawn to low-skilled, service-based businesses, such as restaurants and massage salons. A Thai woman who is married to a Greek-British citizen started a Thai massage salon in Brighton. She has a bachelor's degree in communication from a prestigious Thai university and had worked for Thailand's top media company for many years before she migrated to join her husband in the UK. Settling down with her husband, she found that she is not qualified to pursue her media profession.

> In Thailand, I wrote scoops and commercial spots in Thai language with no efforts. How can I do that in the UK? Even though you are good and you know how to use the sound mixer, you don't have language skills to work with the British media. (Ann, 41 years old)

Selling Thai-ness is the way in which Thai immigrant entrepreneurs interact with opportunity structures in the UK. First, they reach out beyond the ethnic market for a better business opportunity given the small size of the Thai migrant community in the receiving country. Second, they capitalize on the orientalized image of Thai-ness to add value to personal services – a growing business sector in post-industrial economies. However, some drawbacks are inherent in this strategy. The small-scale service-based business sector is labor-intensive. Because of the sensualized stereotype of Thais, Thai female workers in Thai service-based businesses often experience forms of sexual harassment by customers (Kitcharoen, 2007; Sunanta, 2020). Thai migrant service-based entrepreneurship in Brighton demonstrates that macro-level structures and migrants' agency are not mutually exclusive. Forms of capital are used and converted within certain opportunity structures and socio-economic contexts.

ETHNIC AND NON-ETHNIC SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THAI IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

This section will explore how Thai immigrants with different socio-economic backgrounds and migration trajectories mobilize different forms of capital in their entrepreneurial activities. The mix of ethnic and non-ethnic social capital will be analyzed among two groups of Thai immigrant entrepreneurs: 1) highly educated Thai immigrants and 2) Thai immigrants who are married to a British citizen/resident. It should be noted that these two groups are not mutually exclusive. One of the Thai entrepreneurs interviewed in this study has received higher education and is married to a British citizen.

Highly Educated Thai Immigrant Entrepreneurs

According to the findings, three of the research participants obtained graduate and post-graduate degrees either in Thailand or the UK and are currently running restaurant and massage businesses in Brighton. The three highly-educated Thai entrepreneurs share a distinctive tendency in their entrepreneurial practice. Compared to their co-ethnic entrepreneurs with lower educational attainment, Thai migrants with university degrees are more willing to expand beyond ethnic resources in recruiting staff. They are more confident in their English language competency and in engaging with non-Thai people.

Su, 37, has a master's degree from a leading Thai university and was employed as an office staff member for a company in Bangkok. She dated a man at work who also had a master's degree from the same university. After some years of working for the company, her boyfriend wanted to come to the UK where his uncle ran a Thai restaurant. He arrived as a student, helped his uncle with the restaurant, and decided to stay. Su joined him. They got married and bought a Thai restaurant business from a leaving owner. The couple received some financial help from their family in Thailand to start their business. Running a Thai restaurant, Su and her husband hire Thai staff for kitchen work and European staff for table services. She points out that she cannot choose to hire only Thai workers because there are not many Thais in the city.

According to Su, understanding working styles of staff from different cultural backgrounds is important in retaining employees: "European staff members are very strict with time. They start work, take breaks, and leave for home strictly on time", which is different from Thais, who are more flexible with working hours.

Ann, 41, has a BA in communication from Thailand and is now running a Thai massage business in Brighton. She hires both Thai and non-Thai staff in her massage salon. The reception staff and some of the masseuses in her salon are Europeans. Although Ann prefers hiring Thai masseuses, there are not enough Thai workers for her to fill the positions. Worker shortage is one of the most challenging problems for Thai enterprises, especially if the owner hires Thai staff only. Because employment-based visas for low-skilled workers are not available, Thai businesses have to hire locally, but the pool of Thai population in the UK is limited. Less dependent on ethnic networks, highly-educated Thai migrant entrepreneurs are more likely to expand their businesses. By hiring non-Thai staff, Ann is not restrained by the limited pool of Thai workers in the area, making it possible for her to open a second branch of her massage salon.

Thai Entrepreneurs in Mixed Marriages with British Citizens

Loi, 40 years old, joined her British husband in the UK as a marriage migrant in 2004. Loi came from a modest family in rural Thailand and only completed primary education. Once she arrived in the UK, Loi started working as a cleaner while her husband worked as a truck driver. In 2016, her British husband decided to set up a cleaning company providing professional cleaning services. I interviewed her while she was waiting in her company's van for her hired cleaners, two black women, to finish their job at a private building. The company was set up mainly by her husband who takes care of the official and legal aspects of the business. Loi is able to move from being a cleaner to owning a business together with her husband and hiring other migrant workers to work for her. This would not have been possible if she was not married to a British man who has better access to mainstream resources – funding, business and marketing knowledge, and language competency. Loi does not need any Thai ethnic social capital in running her business.

Ann, the owner of a Thai massage salon introduced in the previous section, also has her British husband as a business partner. Ann started by working as an independent masseuse providing services in the living room of her own flat. She gradually expanded her business, hiring a Thai student as a part-time assistant, and finally renting a premise and hiring other Thai masseuses to work for her. As her Thai massage business became successful, earning more income than her husband's salary, he quit his job and became her business partner. With the help of her husband and his training background in finance and business, Ann further expanded her business, moving to a prime location in the city center and opening a second branch.

In the past few decades, Thai migration to the UK and other European countries has been dominated by marriage migration. This migration pattern affects Thai immigrant entrepreneurship. The findings of this study reveal the important role of having a British husband/partner in the business performance of Thai migrant entrepreneurs. In the Swedish context, Webster and Haandrikman (2017)

found that Thai migrant women with Swedish husbands are more likely to own a business compared to Swedish-born women and Thai women without Swedish husbands. The authors contend that Swedish husbands constitute important social networks for Thai migrant women, helping with legal aspects of running a business in Sweden or providing material resources, such as the land on which women grow food for their business. In this study, having a British husband/partner is vital to Thai entrepreneurs in the UK. First, a British husband with a high income reduces the pressure on the Thai migrant woman to start a business for economic survival. She can thus *choose* to work or start a business to earn her own income and gain a sense of self-esteem. More importantly, in cases such as Loi and Ann, the British spouses have also become their business partners. They provide or acquire financial resources, take care of legal aspects such as settling lease contracts or acquiring insurance plans, and contribute their knowledge and familiarity with the local market and business operation. Access to mainstream resources through their British husbands reduces Thai immigrant entrepreneurs' reliance on ethnic social networks and potentially benefits their enterprises.

THE CAPITAL POOR AND BUSINESS FAILURE

Different from other studies on immigrant entrepreneurship, I interviewed people who failed at setting up their own businesses in the UK. Nuan (45) is one example. She is a part-time masseuse at a Thai massage salon who once attempted but failed to set up her own massage salon.

Nuan comes from a farmers' family in the impoverished region of Isan in Thailand. She only completed primary education when she went to work in Bangkok at the age of 13. She had worked as a factory worker, housemaid, waitress, and hired laborer in a recycling warehouse. She tried to start her own recycling business in Thailand but it was not successful. She came to the UK in 2007 as the wife of a British man whom she met through an online dating agency. Once arrived in the UK, she joined him working as a keeper of a football stadium. Her part-time salary was paid to her husband's account because he refused to help her open her own individual bank account. He later met another Thai woman during his trip to Thailand and Nuan separated from him after a year of marriage. She had no home and no job and found help from a Thai woman who ran a food catering business. Nuan later found a job as a masseuse in Brighton through the Thai migrant network. She worked part-time at two Thai massage salons, which accounted for six days of work per week. She developed muscle strains from overworking. She eventually had to reduce her working hours, which resulted in a reduced income. Nuan once started her own massage business by jointly renting a building with an Indian hairdresser. The business was not successful. She did not make enough to pay the rent and was evicted from the building. In retrospect, she thinks that the business failed because she was on her own. She could not manage the phone calls, paperwork, and marketing all by herself. She is a single woman with low social, cultural, and economic capital both in Thailand and the UK, and this eventually hampered her entrepreneurship opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The relatively new, small, but highly feminized and internally diverse Thai migrant community in the UK is an interesting case study for immigrant entrepreneurship. Empirical findings from this study confirm Kloosterman's (2010) observation that immigrant entrepreneurs often cater everyday services to the economically rich, time-poor destination countries in the global North. Thai immigrant entrepreneurships in Brighton are mainly focused on food, massage, and cleaning services. Thai restaurant and massage salon owners mobilize Thai-ness as a brand to attract non-Thai local customers.

In the context of the lightly-regulated business environment in the UK (Sepulveda et al., 2011), the feminized and geographically dispersed Thai migrant population participates in the old ethnic business niches – food, body care, and cleaning – with increasing flexibility. I observed the fluidity and the move between employment, self-employment, and business ownership within the same business sector among Thai migrants in Brighton. The fact that Thai immigrant entrepreneurs remain in the low-skilled, 'high-touch' sectors confirms Jones et al.'s (2014) and Barrett et al.'s (2003) argument that the UK's lightly-regulated business environment encourages quantity rather than quality of ethnic enterprises.

I follow Ram et al. (2008) and Vershinina et al. (2011) in seeing structure and agency as mutually constitutive in the development of Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in Brighton. Limited access to professional occupations in the local labor market is a structural condition that attracts Thai migrants into self-employment and entrepreneurship. In this study, university educated Thai migrants venture into the food and massage businesses – a labor-intensive work that is below their skill level. However, they do not join the cleaning work that Thai migrants with lower education level take up.

Agency and opportunities of Thai migrant entrepreneurs are conditioned by macro-level structures. Adopting a tourism discourse that promotes Thai culture as being rich in the visceral pleasures of touch and taste reproduces ethnic stereotypes that Westerners hold for Thais. These stereotypes limit other occupational opportunities and contain Thai migrants within the 'high touch' business of interactive service work, which requires the management of the worker's body and emotions (Sunanta, 2020).

In addition, the sensualized image of Thais encourages sexual harassment and stigmatization. The emerging Thai massage businesses in Western countries are sometimes viewed as a disguise for prostitution. In the context of South-to-North marriage migration from Thailand to Germany, Sinsuwan's (2018) research on the occupational choices of Thai female migrants reveals that economic capital earned in the stigmatized sector of massage services decreases migrants' symbolic capital and lowers their social standing.

Thai migrants from different socio-economic backgrounds and migration pathways have differential access to resources for their entrepreneurial projects. Migrants with graduate and post-graduate degrees are less reliant on hiring from the limited pool of ethnic workers, making growth and expansion easier. Migrants who have accumulated cultural capital in the form of knowledge of the local market and customers' preferences

are able to convert it to their economic advantage. Lastly, Thai marriage migrants who have a British spouse as a business partner have access to mainstream, non-ethnic economic, cultural, and social capital that are beneficial for their entrepreneurial projects. However, this advantage is accompanied by a risk of overreliance on the British spouse and compromising Thai migrant business's sustainability in the event of divorce or relationship breakdown. Thai immigrant entrepreneurship challenges assumptions about the role of immigrants' family and ethnic social capital in the studies of immigrant entrepreneurship. Nee and Sanders' (2001) discussion of the mobilization of different forms of capital was based on the understanding that immigrants migrate as a family consisting of co-ethnic members. The prevalence of mixed marriages among Thai immigrants demonstrates the importance of non-ethnic social capital as marriages to a British spouse reduce immigrants' reliance on ethnic networks for resources.

The deployment of different forms of capital in Thai immigrant entrepreneurship challenges a simple understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship. Businesses labeled as Thai and run by Thai migrants in Brighton are not purely ethnic enterprises; they represent inter-cultural enterprises as described by Nederveen Pieterse (2003), mobilizing both ethnic and non-ethnic forms of capital.

The small sampling size and relatively short time of observation are the limitations of this study. A longitudinal study will provide a better view of the development and dynamics of Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in this locality. Thai immigrants' businesses in Brighton are not representative of the overall Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in the UK. The study leans on the mixed embeddedness framework in locating Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in a specific time and place. A study of Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in other cities in the UK might yield different results due to locally specific legal and socio-economic contexts and the make-up of the Thai migrant population that create different opportunity structures and business environments.

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Multiform Transmission and Belonging: Buddhist Social Spaces of Thai Migrant Women in Belgium

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▸ Fresnoza-Flot, A. (2022). Multiform transmission and belonging: Buddhist social spaces of Thai migrant women in Belgium. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 15*(2), 231-251.

The Thai migration to Belgium is numerically a woman-led phenomenon, which has captured social attention for the last decades. This attention entails stereotypes about Thai migrant women as 'workers' in the intimate industry and/or 'exotic wives' of Belgian men. To challenge these stereotypes, the present paper explores the often-ignored dimension of Thai women's sociality. Specifically, it examines the transmission dynamics occurring in their Buddhist social spaces, which shape and reinforce their sense of belonging. To do so, it draws from ethnographic fieldwork with Thai migrant women and key social actors within the Thai population in the country. Data analysis unveils that these women engage in multiform modes of transmission in their Buddhist social spaces. First, they transmit good deeds from the material world to the spiritual realm through merit-making practices and by seeking spiritual guidance in the temple. Second, they pass their socio-cultural ways of belonging to their children by engaging in different socializing activities. And third, they involve themselves in sharing religious faith, material symbols, and tastes described as part of Thai culture. Through this multiform transmission, Thai migrant women confront in subtle ways the common-held views about them at the intersection of their various identities as spouses, mothers, citizens, and Buddhist devotees.

Keywords: Belgium; Buddhist Social Spaces; Multiform Transmission; Thai Buddhist Temples; Thai Migrant Women

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INTRODUCTION

For my qualitative study of ethnically mixed families involving Thai migrants in Belgium, I frequented these migrants' social spaces, such as Theravada Buddhist temples (*wat*) in the country. "Social spaces" in this context are understood as networked relations in Lefebvre's (1991) sense. They are "the means", "the outcome", and "the medium of social and cultural activity" (Knott, 2005, p. 34). In two of the temples I regularly visited in Belgium, I found the altar a fascinating, vibrant social space occupied by sacred Buddhist figures, images, and objects

(jars, flower vases, candle holders, etc.) in lively colors (see Figure 1). Most of these sacred things had crossed state borders, notably traveling from Thailand to Belgium. The flowers, burning incense, candles, water in wine glasses, and food offerings in front of the altar reflected the active spiritual engagement of Thai migrants. This engagement brings to the fore the transmission dynamics across borders (spiritual, spatial, temporal), raising the question of how Thai Buddhist social spaces such as *wat* shape and reinforce Thai migrants' sense of belonging.

Figure 1. A vibrant altar in a Thai Theravada Buddhist temple in Belgium (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

The focus of this paper on Thai Buddhist social spaces originates from the observation that studies about these spaces in Europe remain so far scarce (except Baumann, 1995; Plank, 2015; Webster, 2016; Xiu, 2015). In Belgium, the existence of Theravada Buddhist temples (De Backer, 2002) suggests that Thai migrants' sociality goes beyond the domestic and labor market spheres, which may produce or reinforce different senses of belonging. To find out the role of Buddhist social spaces in shaping these migrants' belonging, I investigate the case of Thai migrant women in the present study. These women quantitatively dominate the Thai population in Belgium, making up 86% of the 3,862 Thais present in the country (Statbel, 2022). Most of them enter the country through family reunification as fiancées or spouses of Belgian nationals. Thai migrant women generally reside in the Brussels capital and Flanders, the Flemish-speaking region of the country. They usually find employment in the restaurant sector, dry goods stores, supermarkets, and domestic service sector, working as cleaners and nannies.

Before unveiling the transmission dynamics in which Thai migrant women are engaged in their Buddhist social spaces, I present the analytical framework of my study that builds upon the concept of transmission while adopting an intersectionality stance. I also define in this section the key terms and concepts I mobilize in my paper. After this section, I revisit the corpus of works on migrants' religiosity and the question of belonging in the context of migration. This literature review aims to identify the forms of transmission in migrants' religious spaces, which may help explore Thai migrant women's Buddhist social spaces in Belgium. Following this state-of-the-art section, I provide a background context in which I unveil the social situation of Thai migrant women in Belgium at the intersection of various categories of difference. In a separate section, I describe my methodology and ethnographic fieldwork. The central part of the paper presents three forms of transmission occurring in *wat* and within the realm of the home of my research informants: transcendental, transgenerational, and transnational.

UNDERSTANDING BELONGING THROUGH TRANSMISSION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The focus in the present paper on belonging brings to the fore this concept's signification and how it can be understood. It is important to clarify its operational meaning and explain two possible ways to approach it within the context of migration.

Belonging is a polysemic concept, which reflects its complexity as a subjective experience and an empirical phenomenon. Yuval-Davis (2006) defines it as an "emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home'" (p. 197), or in the words of May (2011), "a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings" (p. 368). Home and surroundings can mean different things to individuals or collectives. In a migration setting, they most often refer to one's group, society, or nation of origin, which suggests that belonging has something to do with identification and affiliation. However, Knott (2017) argues that "belonging" is "an ongoing and performed act" (p. 223), which therefore goes beyond the notions of membership (i.e., being part of a specific group or organization) and identity (i.e., subjective definition of oneself based on specific characteristics). These notions generally suggest fixedness rather than fluidity. Nonetheless, the notion of "membership" has become more and more fluid over the years (Grothe-Hammer & La Cour, 2020). In contrast, the notion of "identity" has become increasingly associated with the term identification that is more process-oriented (Hall, 1997). Like the term "identification", belonging is a process entailing the performance of certain identities through different practices.

In order to grasp belonging, the lens of "transmission" – a process of passing something to someone (Treps, 2000) – appears useful because of its broad scope encompassing other social processes, such as the phenomenon of transnationalism in the context of migration. Basch et al. (1994) define "transnationalism" as the maintenance by migrants of various forms of social ties linking their society of origin and destination. This process entails constant passing and receiving or, in other words, transfer of information, symbols, values, and objects across borders of nation-states. Another related process that the concept of transmission can analytically capture is what social and cultural psychology scholars call "transgenerational transmission"

(Fornaro, 2019). In the migration setting, this topic has attracted scholarly interests in different disciplines, focusing mostly on vertical (parent to children), horizontal (sibling to sibling), and reverse (children to parent) transfer of what Fornaro (2019) enumerates as "themes, ideologies, normative values, relational and emotional traits of one's own culture of belonging" (p. 308). Among these elements, the transmission of socio-cultural "ways of belonging" (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) occupies the central stage. These ways are "practices that signal or enact identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group" (p. 1010). Finally, the concept of transmission can illuminate what individual migrants intend to transmit from the material world to the spiritual realm through their religious practices. Through the conceptual lens of transmission, the present paper investigates the key role of Buddhist social spaces such as *wat* in Thai migrants' life in Belgium, specifically the enactment of their sense of belonging.

This enactment process may involve individual characteristics or categories of difference based on factors such as gender, social class, and ethnicity. Gender is the socially constructed difference between men and women, signifying power relations (Scott, 1986). Drawing from a Marxist perspective on economic inequalities and Bourdieu's institutionalized form of cultural capital, such as educational diploma (Bourdieu, 1997; Bottero, 2014; Van Hear, 2014), the concept of social class in this paper encompasses both economic resources and education attainment. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is defined here as a marker of otherness used to describe differences among socio-cultural groups (Pieterse, 2003). In heterogeneous countries like Thailand with several regions, languages, and religions (Cohen, 1991; Kitiarsa, 2005; Luangthongkum, 2007), the term "internal ethnicity" (Light et al., 1993) appears useful for this paper to make sense of Thai migrants' enactment of belonging at the local level. The term "global ethnicity" (Light et al., 1992) refers to national belonging and appears effective in identifying Thai migrant women's link to the Thai nation.

To understand the influence of gender, social class, and ethnicity (internal or global) in Thai women's enactment of belonging, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) appears an effective analytical approach to be adopted. It focuses on the simultaneous interaction at a given place and time of various factors or categories of difference, which (re)produces the social subordination and marginality of minority women. It is originally applied to the case of Black women in the United States of America (ibid.) but has increasingly been adopted in recent years to study other cases of minority women in the context of migration (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Fathi, 2017; Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Lévy, 2022). Aligned with the theme of the special issue that the present paper is part of, I borrow this approach of intersectionality to understand Thai migrant women's belonging through multiform transmission practices in their Buddhist social spaces.

MIGRATION, RELIGION, AND BELONGING

The literature on religion in the context of migration shows the plural role of this social institution in the lives of migrants in their receiving countries and, more recently, in their social spaces traversing the borders of nation-states (Levitt, 2003; 2004). One of the important functions of religion identified in this literature is its facilitating and reinforcing role of migrants' sense of belonging.

Migrants manifest and affirm their sense of belonging through ritual performances during key life-course events (births, marriages, funerals) and through material, symbolic, and spatial consumption while demonstrating their religion-based moral values. These "ways of belonging" (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) demonstrate individuals' various memberships to a faith-based population, an immigrant community, and one or several nations. They also point to religion's crucial role in the life of migrants: as an "expression of identity", "community formation", "refuge from oppression", and "site of resistance and activism" (Bonifacio & Angeles, 2010, p. 10).

Moreover, belonging appears anchored in geographic places. Migrants in their receiving countries usually congregate in their places of worship that fulfill a social-izing function. These places provide different opportunities for migrants in terms of housing, economic possibilities, and access to socio-legal information (Fresnoza-Flot, 2010). Religious activities such as pilgrimages and organized prayers create and perpetuate social spaces (Liebelt, 2010; Skrbis, 2007), producing a collective feel-ing of being part of a larger community at the intersection of social differences. These activities connect migrants with their countries of origin (Bava & Capone, 2010; McAlistar, 2002; Socorro Flores Tondo, 2010), facilitate their incorporation into their receiving country (Bastenier & Dassetto, 1985), and link them to other migrants of the same faith in other countries (McAuliffe, 2016). Places of worship also facilitate the reproduction of linguistic and other socio-cultural traditions among migrants and their descendants (Maliepaard & Lubbers, 2013). At the same time, migrants reinforce their faith and spiritual connections by frequenting these places and other sites socially considered sacred, which allows them to become and/or portray themselves as good, enlightened, or respectable individuals (Ambrosini et al., 2021; Pande, 2017).

Overall, it is evident that migrants' religious social spaces are venues of trans-mission of faith, socio-cultural traditions, and material objects across national, generational, and spiritual borders. The present paper investigates the dynamics of this multiform transmission in Thai migrant women's Buddhist social spaces in Belgium. Doing so provides fresh insights about these migrants' religious sociality and agency. The objective here is not to replace common-held views about them with religion-shaped perspectives but to reveal their silenced identities and multifaceted social lives, which can question essentializing views about them in their receiving country.

THAI MIGRANT WOMEN AT INTERSECTING CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE IN BELGIUM

At the time of the study, Thai migrant women, like other migrants in mixed couples in Belgium, were experiencing social and political scrutiny, notably concerning the authenticity of their relationship with Belgian citizens. This situation unveils how Thai women are viewed in Belgium, and the intersecting categories of difference that (re)produce stereotypes[1] about them.

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1   This term refers to "social perception" about individuals based on supposed or imagined attributes, which generates generalizing "impression" (Lippman, 1922, as cited in Tao & Chen, 2017, p. 22).

During my fieldwork, some Thai women criticized the reality television series called *Exotische liefde* (exotic love) broadcasted on the VT4 channel in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of the country) for its portrayal of Thai women as being 'only after money'. The word "exotic" in the title of the series implies, on the one hand, a foreign country geographically far from Belgium, and on the other hand, someone who is stereotypically imagined as different from the Belgian population in socio-cultural terms. Thai migrant women in the aforementioned television series were portrayed as exotic wives or partners of Belgian men. In this exoticism of Thai women in Belgium, religiosity appears not highlighted; rather, these women's feminine qualities are viewed as part of the encompassing category of Asian women. One Belgian man married to a Thai woman remarked to me during an interview, "there is an image, a phantasm, this kind of phantasm of the Asian woman, attentive, submissive". This remark corroborates the stereotype about Asian women that Heyse (2010) observed in her study of Russian-speaking marriage migrant women in Belgium. Her informants distanced themselves from "Thai and Philippine women, who are not highly educated and are used to 'serving their husband, being docile and obedient'" (pp. 76-77). Although studies show that exoticism entails the notions of religiosity or spirituality (Hélie-Lucas, 2001; Shields, 2010), Thai women in Belgium appear mainly viewed as "Asian women" with feminine qualities suited for couple or family formation.

Aside from gender stereotypes, sexual and ethnic stereotypes about Thai migrant women abound in Belgian society, as can be observed in several online commercials about Thai massage parlors, often featuring sexy photographs of women presented as Thais. At the beginning of the study in 2012, there were 75 Thai massage parlors in Brussels alone, and these parlors were mostly offering erotic or body-to-body massages (Serve the City, 2010). As our fieldwork among Thai migrant women progressed, it became clearer that these women's bodies were most often genderized, sexualized, and ethnicized in commercial advertisements to attract clients. This stereotyping occurred against the backdrop of the Belgian state's control and regulations of binational marriages due to the rising cases of marriage of convenience in the country. The Belgian state examines the "authenticity" of binational relationships through the lens of romantic love (Mascia & Odasso, 2015; Maskens, 2015). Since most Thai migrant women are much younger than their Belgian partners, their union often attracts the Belgian society's critical gaze.

In short, at the time of fieldwork for the present study, the stereotypes about Thai migrant women in Belgium were exotic wives or partners of Belgian men who were 'only after money' and/or workers in the intimate industry. As we will see, the Thai women interviewed in this study revealed other aspects of their lives beyond common-held stereotypes.

DATA-GATHERING METHODS AND PERSONS INTERVIEWED

The present paper draws from my three-year research (2012-2015) on children of ethnically mixed families in Belgium, specifically from my case study of Thai-Belgian families. My ethnographic fieldwork for the research mentioned above took place in the three regions of the country: Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels-Capital. I adopted

qualitative data-gathering methods such as interviews, observations, and informal conversations. Aside from ethnographic fieldnotes, my fieldwork generated more than a hundred interviews, including 19 interviews with Thai migrant women and 12 interviews with key social actors[2] within the Thai immigrant population (i.e., two temple abbots, two Thai embassy officials, three Thai language teachers, and five association leaders).

informants (pseudonyms)	age	duration of immigration (in years)	education level	profession	children
Phailin	60	25	none	retired dressmaker	1
Prisana	43	20	bachelor	translator	1
Malisa	43	18	bachelor	factory worker	1
Daw	43	24	elementary	office cleaner	1
Ruang	43	14	bachelor	cook in a restaurant	0
Malee	49	17	bachelor	home cleaner	2
Farung	46	10	postgraduate	Thai teacher/entrepreneur	1
Nin	44	10	vocational	housewife	1
Piti	50	20	vocational	caregiver	1
Nom	37	12	bachelor	home cleaner	1
Pim	45	30	secondary	shop manager	4
Solada	57	34	elementary	entrepreneur	3
Siriporn	47	25	elementary	home cleaner	3
Mai	43	13	bachelor	housewife	2
Kanya	43	25	elementary	housewife	4
Pailin	62	25	elementary	home cleaner/entrepreneur	1
Siri	49	26	bachelor	housewife	3
Dao	50	22	bachelor	housewife	0
Som	53	15	bachelor	office worker/language teacher	0

Table 1. Thai women interviewed in Belgium

As table 1 shows, the women interviewed were mostly in their 40s, and many had lived in Belgium for over 20 years. Most of them had migrated to Belgium for or by marriage. Only two had no children, and six informants had offspring from previous relationships with Thai men. Although many were married to Belgian men, the informants did not become completely economically dependent on their Belgian husbands. They mostly engaged in the labor market but none in the massage industry at the time of my interview: for example, as home cleaners, language teachers, and entrepreneurs. All but seven of the interviewed women had tertiary-level education: two with vocational degrees, nine with bachelor's diplomas, and one with postgrad-uate education. The high number of informants residing in Belgium for a long time and with tertiary-level education might be the effect of the snowballing approach I adopted, as I met some of the women interviewed through the referrals of a Thai association leader who introduced me to her Thai friends as a researcher. To vary

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2   Social actors in this context refer to individuals who fulfill specific roles within the Thai immigrant population in Belgium and have regular contact with their fellow migrants. They are involved "in processes and in carrying out initiatives" (Sénécal, 2012, p. 37).

my sample in terms of educational attainment and economic situation, I frequented Thai Buddhist temples - the main social spaces of Thai migrants in Belgium. In these spaces, I presented myself as part of a 'mixed' family and as a mother of ethnically mixed children. This way of self-presentation allowed me to attract Thai informants with modest social class backgrounds.

With the informants' consent, I recorded my interviews with them. These interviews and my informal conversations with them were carried out either in French or in English, which represents a limitation of my study. To gain some contextual information about Thai migrants in general (e.g., history of immigration, estimated population, associations founded, places most frequented, and common challenges encountered), I did not only interview key social actors within the Thai immigrant population, but also drew from scholarly literature and available statistical data on Thai migration in Belgium. Except in a few cases in which friendship blossomed during fieldwork, my relationship with the Thai women informants can be generally described as a typical researcher-informant relation, characterized by reciprocal exchanges of symbolic gestures (e.g., sharing foods and drinks) and personal information about our family and immigrant lives.

During my fieldwork, I identified four temples: one in Wallonia, that is, Wat Thai Dhammaram, and three *wat* in Flanders, namely Wat Dhammapateep, Buddharama Temple, and Wat Phra Dhammakaya. I carried out fieldwork almost every weekend at Wat Thai Dhammaram and Wat Dhammapateep, which attracted many Thai migrants and Belgians. These temples are located in a European-style house or building, unlike Thai Buddhist temples in other destination countries of Thai migrants, such as the one in Wimbledon in the United Kingdom (see Chuenglertsiri, 2020). Based on my observation, the main room of these temples, where one can find the Buddhist altar, can only accommodate about 15 to 20 people. Nonetheless, both temples have spacious surroundings, where outdoor activities such as flea markets and festivals can be organized. Compared to the temple in Wallonia, the Wat Dhammapateep in Flanders was at that time located far from the city center.[3] This temple was not easy to reach due to the limited number of public buses passing in its location. It was not surprising that Thai migrants I met in this temple usually came by car.

For the present paper, I draw from my fieldnotes and interviews to unveil the transmission dynamics in Thai migrant women's Buddhist social spaces, notably temples. The names of my informants that appear in this text are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

MULTIFORM TRANSMISSION AND BELONGING

The *wat* and other Thai Buddhist social spaces, specifically home altars, are transmission sites for Thai migrants. I observed during fieldwork that this transmission has several dimensions, namely transcendental, transgenerational, and transnational. These dimensions are related to other aspects of Thai migrants' Buddhist social spaces in Belgium.

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3   Before the temple moved to a new location in the same region, it took about 15 minutes to reach it by public bus from the main station in the nearest city.

Transcendental Transmission: Offerings for and Guide from the Spiritual Realm

The question of transmission goes beyond the mundane world for Thai migrant women in the present study. These women's Buddhist social spaces, notably the *wat*, unveil the transcendental transmission they actively engage in, transforming good deeds into merits by transferring them from the material world to the spiritual realm. The boundary between these spheres is the "most important boundary" and not the one "between men and women" (Plank 2015, p. 208).

Offerings are the most common practice for transcending the spiritual realm. Many Thai migrant women regularly visit a temple to pray alone or with their family members. During this visit, most of them offer thanks in different forms: giving to the monk mineral water, clothes, vegetables, and financial donation, among others (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2015). Such offering is widely observed among Buddhists in Thailand and also in migrant populations of different religious backgrounds in their receiving countries (Bonifacio & Angeles, 2010; Levitt, 2003), which attests to the role of religious sites such as temples and churches as spaces of socialization. For Thai migrants, a *wat* is an ideal place to pray and meditate. In fact, meditation sessions are available in *wat* for Thais and non-Thais. Most Thai women participate in these sessions without their Belgian husbands, thereby demonstrating their religious subjectivity detached from their husbands, who are mostly non-practicing Christians. Coming alone or with their young children to the temple allows these women to highlight their other global ethnic, religious, and gender identifications as Theravada Buddhist Thai women and mothers.

Thai informants continue their praying and meditation practices in their homes, where one can generally find a small Buddhist altar. This altar is a micro-social space that attracts visitors' gaze when showcased in 'public' spaces such as a living room or on the side of the stairway in the informants' home. Thai informants told me during my interviews or informal conversations that they were responsible for arranging and decorating their homes, including where to put their Buddha images and/or small altar. This role at home partly reflects the gender division of domestic labor in these women's families, where they usually accomplish the reproductive work from cleaning to cooking. In many cases, the Buddhist altar is accompanied by an image of the king of Thailand (Figure 2 below) and decorations such as elephants. The type of materials of the sacred decorations (wood or stone), from where they were brought (in Thailand or in Belgium), and the way they are positioned at home (sporadically or in a specific place) partly suggest the social class belonging of Thai informants. Hence, the specific place in the Thai informants' home, where the Buddhist altar and other sacred images/objects are positioned, stems from the intersection of these women's gender, social class, and global ethnicity.

Interestingly, informants with traumatic difficulties in the past, such as problematic divorce, loss of investments, and near-death experiences, seem to devote a lot of time and energy to expressing their faith. One interviewed woman I call Solada (57 years old), who maintained an altar, invited me to see it in her bedroom. While standing in front of the altar, she narrated to me her near-death experience and encounter with floating lights or souls trying to enter her lifeless body. She also shared with me her spiritual understanding about her reincarnation and sufferings in

Figure 2. An altar in the living room of an informant's home (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

this life due to what she did in her past life. Like other informants, Solada emphasized the uselessness of paying attention to the past on the one hand and the importance of focusing on the present on the other hand.

> What I do wrong, what I don't do wrong, I don't forget, but I don't put [them] in my mind anymore. I don't want to live in the past, I want [to] live now. Yes, that is important. Otherwise, you [are] not happy, never, you cannot. [...] you have to accept what you have. You have to when something happen(s). Try to pray [to] forget our problem, but not sit like that, like a dog. (interview transcripts, 28 April 2014)

The "present" means being a good human being and praying for the future. To have a hint about their future and prepare for it, some women go to the temple and seek advice from the monk to find solutions to their problems. They also resort to fortune-telling using fortune sticks (*Seam Si*). In one temple, I met an informant named Pai (43 years old), who showed me how they glimpsed the future. She and other women inside the temple first prayed before the Buddhist altar. After that, they went to the corner of the temple and shook a bottle filled with thin, red-colored wooden sticks. Each stick was numbered. After shaking the bottle, they made one stick fall and opened the corresponding paper that contained a message written in Thai, English, and Chinese about their lives. One example of such a message in English is reproduced below:

> Just like a flower, blooming under the angry sun, but managers [*sic*] to look fresh. Like a little bird learning to fly a strong wind, falls down [*sic*] to the

ground. Life would be enjoyable in the future. Patient recovering. Not likely to find a good mate at this stage. Legal case not favorable. Some good luck exists [*sic*]. Despite some hardships at present, it would be better not too long. (fieldnotes, 4 May 2014)

Pai was happy to see the message she got from her stick. Fortune sticks offered her a sense of hope in her complicated life (being in a third relationship and trying to be a mother to children with different biological fathers and residing in three distinct countries). Women with difficulties (economic and/or familial), such as Pai, find a way to come to grips with their future in *wat*. Turning to *wat* for moral and spiritual support seems to result from the interaction of these women's social class (in economic terms) and gender roles as wives and mothers.

Figure 3. Offerings for the monks during *Songkran* celebration (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

During *Songkran* (New Year) celebrations, Thai migrants, their families, and friends congregate in *wat*, offer gifts to the monks, and eat together to obtain additional blessings and merits. In one *wat* during the *Songkran* celebration in 2014, Thai migrants hung colorful small gifts on a wishing tree next to a house transformed into a temple. Next to this tree was a table filled with ready-made offerings as Figure 3 shows: wrapped gifts with bottles of mineral water, instant noodles, canned goods, and small plastic bags of rice. Visitors could buy these offerings for the monks (fieldwork photos, 27 April 2014). The social class background of Thai devotees can be observed in the way they dress (formal or informal clothes, traditional Thai clothes or European-style clothing) to present themselves before the sacred. Merit-making activities, offerings, and seeking spiritual guidance in the temple reflect the transmission dynamics in which Thai migrant women are implicated in this world towards

the spiritual, sacred realm. This transmission that allows them to underline their religious and global ethnic belonging at the intersection of gender, social class, and global ethnicity also has a transgenerational dimension.

Transgenerational Transmission of Socio-Cultural Ways of Belonging from Mother to Children

During my fieldwork in a Thai Buddhist temple in Flanders, a young Belgian-Thai boy with his Thai mother participated in the *Song Nam Phra* (water bathing ceremony). The Thai woman taught her son how to behave before the monks and perform the nonverbal greeting called *wai*.[4] During large ceremonies such as *Song Nam Phra* and *Songkran*, one can see and meet many Thai-Belgian families with their children in the temple. During these events, one can also witness the religious transmission from Thai mothers to their children.

Like other places of worship, such as Christian churches (Fresnoza-Flot, 2020; Maliepaard & Lubbers, 2013), *wat* plays a key role in transgenerational transmission in migrants' families. Thai mothers bring their children to the temples to celebrate different key moments of life. Practices around these moments are ways of belonging that perpetuate the practices they learned in their country of origin. For instance, I once witnessed a ceremony of hair cutting of a Thai-Belgian baby in a Thai Buddhist temple in Flanders. During the ceremony, money was attached around the wrist of the baby, and a small quantity of the baby's hair was cut and buried at the foot of a large tree in the vicinity of the temple. After the ceremony, the Thai kin of the mother celebrated through commensality. They brought food to the temple and shared it with other temple visitors.

Commensality is one of the venues for transgenerational transmission (Bailey, 2017), which can be observed in *wat*. One young Thai woman I call Pat, who visited a temple in Flanders with her Thai mother, told me that "every lunchtime, women and other people in the temple sit … around the monks" and the "monks give some information and pray" (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2014). Pat was among the few young adult children of Thai migrants who visited the temple from time to time. During my fieldwork, I observed that most children of Thai migrants who regularly frequent the temples in Flanders and Wallonia were minors of very young age. Their Thai mothers rarely came to the temple with their Belgian husbands. The mother-child dyad appears to be a salient figure in Thai Buddhist temples, which challenges the stereotypical social image of Thai women in Belgium as "spouses" of Belgian men and not as "mothers".

Temples are also places where the Thai language and traditional cultural practices are transmitted. For example, one Thai temple in Flanders provides Thai language and traditional Thai dance classes for children of Thai migrants during weekends, whereas the temple in Wallonia offers classes on traditional Thai musical instruments (Fresnoza-Flot, 2019). It is Thai mothers who introduce their children to these activities. Ruang, for example, explained below the importance of transgenerational transmission of the Thai language from her to her daughter.

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4   This gesture involves "bringing open palms together and synchronizing with a dip of the head or a bow (low, lower, or lowest, depending upon the level of veneration to be shown toward the person or object being addressed)" (Welty, 2009, p. xi).

> If we go to the temple, we speak Thai. I say that 'now, you have to speak Thai. You have to know the Thai way. You have to know the Thai [language]. You have to learn everything, how to speak, how to write, everything', and when you go back [to Thailand], they [will]? say 'ah your mother teaches [you] good, your father teaches you good' [something] like that. (interview transcripts, 7 April 2014)

This narrative conveys how Thai migrant mothers such as Ruang are influenced transnationally by their country's conception of *Thai-ness* based on the mastery of the Thai language and what they call 'Thai culture'. Interestingly, Thai mothers reinforce their internal ethnicity during their interactions in the Thai temples, thereby transmitting such affiliation to their children. During my fieldwork in a Thai temple in Flanders, Pat remarked that most Thais frequenting the temple originated from the Northeast region (Isan) of Thailand, that these migrants communicated with one another using their local language, and that the foods prepared in the temple were mainly Isan food[5] (Fieldnotes, 28 June 2014). Many of these migrants brought their young children to the temple, where they were exposed to these socio-cultural ways of communication and commensality. In this case, gender and internal ethnicity intersect, producing a nuanced intergenerational transmission. Nonetheless, the classes organized for children in *wat* is the Thai national language, and outside of the class, children used to communicate with one another using the Dutch language. One informant named Farung, who regularly brings her child to the temple every weekend, confided me her frustration:

> Actually, I have to go to the temple, almost whole day [...] I cook in the morning. I prepare the food, and then around lunch, I go to the temple, and I eat there. And one o'clock (is) the class, the children's (Thai) class, but sometimes, I bring Bryan [his son] you know from (the) beginning, but now I know he got more forward (progress). He got better than (before), but the good thing is he can talk to other kids, but they talk in Dutch, yeah, together. [...] so, I'm not really pleased with that. (interview transcripts, 14 July 2014)

Social class-based groupings or identifications were also salient in Thai Buddhist social spaces. Most Thai association leaders I interviewed were university-educated. One of them confided the difficulty that association leaders encounter in Belgium when trying to obtain the cooperation and active involvement of Thai migrant women of working-class background (mostly from Isan) in their activities. The transmission of social class belonging from Thai mothers to their children takes place against the backdrop of a class divide, which most often has an internal ethnic dimension. During my fieldwork, Thai women who talked to me referred to themselves as "Thai" (*khon Thai*), their global ethnicity of being born in Thailand. This self-presentation usually occurred the first time we met when they mistook me for a Thai woman and asked me if I was Thai. After several interactions, some of them emphasized their internal

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5   Many Thai migrants I met during fieldwork in Flanders and Wallonia mentioned glutinous rice and papaya salad as typical Isan foods.

ethnicity as someone coming from Isan and speaking the Lao Isan language. During conversations with them, Thai informants distinguished themselves from other Thai migrants not only in terms of internal ethnicity (i.e., local origin and regional language spoken) but also in terms of social class belonging (specifically education attainment or previous employment in Thailand) and the motivation behind their mixed marriage, as Nom with university education explained below:

> They (other Thai women) have a different meaning, I think. For me, I married with love, [...] I think the women who (have) high, different mentality for education, if high education, I think, they would love to go with men that they can talk to, that can build together, that can side by side share, share something like that (with them). But for women who (have) low education, I think a little different, to have a better life, yes, I think. (interview transcripts, 8 June 2014)

By stressing the romantic aspect of her relationship with her Belgian partner and highlighting her social class belonging, Nom appears to challenge the stereotype about Thai women in Belgium as exotic wives who are only after money. Her case is representative of other informants' cases showing how stereotypes about Thai women in Belgium shape their narratives of belonging. Frequenting the temple with their children and engaging in religious practices of praying, offering presents, and meditation allow Thai women like Nom to make visible and transmit to their offspring their valorizing identities at the intersection of gender, religious affiliation, social class, and global and/or internal ethnicity.

Thus, Thai Buddhist temples as a place of socialization (Butratana & Trupp, 2011; Plank, 2015; Webster & Careta, 2016) address Thai mothers' needs and assist them in transmitting 'Thai culture' or, for those from the Northeast region, their internal ethnicity to their children. However, as I explained elsewhere (Fresnoza-Flot, 2021), this changes when children grow up, engage in several activities with their peers, integrate into the labor market, and refuse to frequent their Thai mothers' spaces of socialization. After learning their Thai mothers' socio-cultural ways of belonging, these grown-up children immerse themselves deeply outside their mothers' social spaces to experience different subjectivities.

Transnational Transmission: Faith, Material Symbols, and Tastes

On 24 May 2014, a famous Thai nun from Thailand visited one of the Thai Buddhist temples in Flanders. Many Thai women arrived in this temple dressed in white to listen to her on that day. This event suggests that the temple can be a transmission site, linking one country to another and forming "transnational social spaces" (Faist, 1998). Such a transmission crossing national borders entails geographical movements of people and objects carrying, transferring, and sharing faith, material symbols, and tastes.

The visit of the Thai nun in Belgium was not the sole transnational practice we can observe in Thai Buddhist temples. There are monks from Thailand and other European countries who visit a Thai Buddhist temple and stay there in Belgium. Thai migrants from neighboring European countries arrive in Belgium in a rented

bus for their pilgrimage to a Thai Buddhist temple and to visit renowned touristic places. In one case, a group of Thai migrants, together with the abbot of the Thai Buddhist temple they frequent in Switzerland, first proceeded to the Netherlands to see tulip gardens before coming to Belgium and visiting one of the Thai temples in Flanders (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2014). Pilgrimages such as those observed among Thais in Europe appear widespread among migrant populations worldwide (e.g., Liebelt, 2010; Skrbis, 2007). During these pilgrimages, religious faith is celebrated, shared, and reinforced among visiting migrants and those welcoming them in their place of worship. Belonging not only to the Theravada Buddhist institution but also to the Thai nation as its (former) citizens, Thai migrants' religious affiliation intersects with their global ethnicity in this regard.

Aside from pilgrimages, Thai migrant women visit Thai Buddhist temples outside of their country of residence for other purposes. For example, after a recorded interview with me in her home, Pim (45 years old) showed me on her mobile phone a photo of her and a Thai friend wearing traditional Thai clothes during the *Songkran* celebration in a Thai Buddhist temple in France (Fieldnotes, 14 April 2014). I met a few Thai women residing in the Netherlands who visited Thai *wat* in Belgium to donate things to Thai monks. One of them is Mai whom I met for the first time in a Thai Buddhist temple in Flanders during a *Songkran* celebration. She told me that there were Thai temples in the Netherlands, but she liked the Thai abbot in the temple where we met. In one event in the Thai temple in Wallonia, I was surprised to meet Mai again. This time she came with her friends from the Netherlands to offer sacks of potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and pots of flowers to the abbot of the temple (Fieldnotes, 4 May 2014). Women with good economic resources like Mai most often engage in such a transnational practice, in which social class belonging intersects with their religiosity. Visits and offerings in a Thai Buddhist temple in another country appear here as an enactment of multiple belonging to a privileged social class and to a complex Theravada Buddhist transnational community in which religious hybridization is taking place as in Thailand (Jackson, 2020; Kitiarsa, 2005): for example, occult practices such as using fortune sticks to get a hint of the future (see the section on transcendental transmission).

Temples also act as transnational transmitters to Thailand of the remains of deceased Thai Buddhist migrants, specifically of those with no economic resources and no family members in Belgium. The intersection of women's social class and family situation results in this situation. Ruang explained to me what she observed in one temple she regularly frequented:

> Sometimes they (Thai women) stay here (in Belgium) and kill themselves because they have so much problem, and nobody knows. [...] (someone) bring(s) the ash to the temple and bring (it) back to Thailand because no people [...] can bring (it) because they have no family here. (interview transcripts, 7 April 2014)

In addition, material symbols from Thailand can be easily spotted in Thai Buddhist temples. For example, during the flea market organized every first Sunday of the month in the temple in Wallonia, even the decorations in the temple and the materials used for activities, such as traditional music classes for children, originated

from the country. Likewise, the tools used in fruit-carving classes in one of the Thai temples in Flanders and in soap-carving sessions during a Thai cultural festival in the region were brought from Thailand.[6] As Figure 4 illustrates below, at a monthly flea market in a Thai Buddhist temple, one can find a variety of Thai specialties being sold, which accentuates the Thai sellers' global ethnicity (i.e., being part of the Thai nation) and their identity as 'workers' not in the intimate industry but in the socio-cultural sector. Foods sold are prepared using ingredients and utensils mostly brought from Thailand. Indeed, as Plank (2015) remarks, "religion can also be trans-locative as it links the diaspora to their homeland in different ways through time and space – often through symbolic links" (p. 220).

Figure 4. A section of the flea market behind a Thai temple (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

Hence, Thai Buddhist temples in Belgium may be small in terms of their physical dimensions but appear truly global and cross-border in terms of their social breadth. As social institutions, they are nodal points, or in Naidu's (2012) terms, "central nodal actor(s)" (p. 297), as they connect Thai migrants not only in Belgium but also in Europe as well as between Europe and Thailand. Indeed, Thai Buddhist temples serve as social hubs for Thai migrants (Webster, 2016), offering a feeling of home, a sense of emotional security, and economic opportunities (e.g., for selling Thai specialties).

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6   Thai temples of Thai diasporic populations are often affiliated with other temples in Thailand and sometimes receive financial support from the country. In Belgium, one example is the Wat Thai Dhammaram in Wallonia; it obtained support from the Thai government and the Sangha Supreme Council in Thailand (see https://www.buddhism.be/fr/10-associations/29-wat-thai-dhammaram).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present paper unveils how Thai Buddhist social spaces, specifically *wat*, shape and reinforce Thai migrant women's sense of belonging by serving as sites of transcendental, transgenerational, and transnational forms of transmission. This finding points to how Thai women's sociality is anchored in the sacred in the context of migration and the intersecting categories of difference that shape their multiform transmission practices.

Through ritual performances, sacred practices, and gift-giving, Thai migrant women transform their good deeds into merits and transfer them from the material world into the spiritual one. They transmit their socio-cultural ways of belonging across generations (from parents to children) and nation-state borders (from Thailand to Belgium). These forms of transmission highlight their multifarious belongings at various scales: to a faith community, to an ethno-regional group, to a social class, to their family, and to the Thai nation. Therefore, Thai Buddhist social spaces are a global platform where both the confluence and the affirmation of social differences and identities take place, enabling Thai women's sense-making in their receiving country. The religious sociality of these women reveals the other face of their subjectivity, one that showcases their moral self, reputable and spiritually guided. Thai migrant women's religion-shaped subjectivity challenges the essentializing stereotypes about them as solely exotic wives and/or workers in the intimate industry in Belgium, stereotypes that confine them within the reproductive and productive spheres of social life and silence their multiple identities. Thai migrant women navigate the common-held views about them in subtle ways at the intersection of their various identities as spouses, mothers, citizens, and Buddhist devotees.

The case explored in the present paper reconfirms that migrant women have multifaceted roles in their receiving and origin countries (Cole, 2014; Piper & Roces, 2004) and that places of worship play a significant role in their self-(re)construction (Werbner & Johnson, 2010). What differentiates this paper from previous studies on religion in migration settings is its simultaneous focus on the various forms of transmission in religious social spaces, which uncovers the nuances of migrant women's belonging. This paper also reveals that gender, social class, and (internal/global) ethnicity are the main intersecting categories of difference that influence Thai migrant women's various transmission practices. Sexuality is not salient in these women's Buddhist social spaces, unlike in the outside secular world, where its intersection with gender and ethnicity produces stereotypes of Thai migrant women as 'workers' in the intimate industry and as 'exotic wives' or partners of Belgian men.

The present paper, albeit methodologically limited, offers a starting point for future studies of transmission dynamics in Thai Buddhist social spaces. It suggests several possible themes for these future studies. First, the religious dimension of how Thai migrant women are exoticized in their receiving country will be worth exploring, notably how these migrants' religiosity reinforces certain stereotypes about them. Second, it would be worth exploring what is lost and passed on from Thai mothers to their children, from one space to another, and from the mundane world to the spiritual ones. Studies on this theme will be more insightful if the role of Buddhist social spaces on the ethnic identifications of young people is taken into account. And

third, although it may pose methodological challenges, a study on how Thai mothers, their husbands, and children negotiate, manage, and navigate religious socialization is urgent to gain multiple perspectives on transmission dynamics in Thai migrants' families.

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Coming Home: Thai-Dutch Couples' Spatial Trajectories at the Intersection of Mobility Capital, Gender, and Ageing

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This paper applies the notions of mobility, mobility capital, gender, and ageing to analyze marriage migration and the trajectories of geographical and social mobility of Thai-Dutch couples moving from the Netherlands to Thailand. It is based on in-depth interviews with 12 Thai-Dutch couples who moved from the Netherlands to Thailand and resided in Thailand for between three and twelve years. The study explores the key role of mobility capital in stimulating Thai-Dutch couples' imaginations, their perceptions, and their potential for movement. In terms of their 'mobility turn', I argue that their trajectories of mobility and relocation to Thailand should not be understood as a linear and permanent movement from the Netherlands to Thailand. Rather, this mobility is fluid, complicated, and sometimes fragmented. It is marked by the practices of waiting, hesitation to move, imagining their return, preparing to move, having actually returned, and travelling back and forth between Thailand and the Netherlands. It also encompasses local spatial movement in daily life.

Keywords: Ageing; Gender; Marriage Migration; Mobility; Mobility Capital

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INTRODUCTION

When my husband was 62 years old, he had a health problem. He wished to take an early retirement. In the beginning, I didn't really want to move back to Thailand yet. I was 42 years old at that time and I had been living in the Netherlands for 15 years already. I worked formally as an office cleaner and received a permanent contract. I also built up good relations with many Thai female close friends. Finally, we decided to move to Thailand in 2016 as it would be good for my husband. It would be a great opportunity for me to care for my elderly mother too. (Pear, 46 years old, interview, 20 July 2020)

Since the late 1970s, migration from Thailand to Europe has been facilitated by globalization, capital flows, the advent of information technology and the

expansion of international transport and tourism. A significant feature of this migration is the incidence of cross-cultural marriages between Thai women and European men. In fact, as a result of these cross-border marriages, these women constitute the majority of Thai migrants in Europe (Lapanun, 2019; Mix & Piper, 2003; Ruenkaew, 1999; Statham, 2020). However, in recent years, there has been an ever-increasing reversal of this migration flow with Thai women and their Western husbands moving from Europe back to Thailand (Kanchanachitra & Chuenglertsiri, 2020; Maher & Lafferty, 2014; Sunanta & Jaisuekun, 2022). Currently, these men make up the predominant group of Europeans in Thailand much like their Thai wives did in Europe. Therefore, these "both-ways" migration pathways are highly gendered: approximately 80%-90% of Thai migrants to Europe and North America are women, and 80%-90% of Westerners settling in Thailand are men (Statham et al., 2020, p. 1515).

Studies on marriage migration have strongly emphasized migrants' border crossing, particularly that of women, from the less developed Global South to the more developed regions of the Global North (Ishii, 2016). In the case of Thai-European marriages, the flow of Thai women from Thailand to Europe, the changes in conditions under which they could earn a living in the receiving country, the Thai community in Europe, and the maintenance of transnational links with their family members left behind have all been thoroughly analyzed (Butratana & Trupp, 2011; Fresnoza-Flot & Merla, 2018; Lapanun, 2019; Suksomboon, 2008; Sunanta & Angeles, 2013; Tosakul, 2010). However, limited research has focused on Westerners' migration and their subsequent experiences as partners of Thai woman in Thailand in general (Howard, 2008; Lafferty & Maher, 2020; Scuzzarello, 2020). Likewise, there are few studies on the reverse flow of Thai women and their spouses from Europe to Thailand in particular (Kanchanachitra & Chuenglertsiri, 2020; Statham, 2020). However, the limitations of these studies are threefold. First, they are likely to portray the linear movement of the migrants' international border crossing, the sedentary state of their settlement, and the readjustment of the couples' filial and gendered power relations after their return. Second, the Thai-European couples' experiences of marriage migration are often presented as two distinct scenarios: either residing in Europe or returning to Thailand. Finally, much of the research has overemphasized the marriage migration and transnational relationships of the Thai migrant women from poorly educated, lower socio-economic backgrounds such as those from rural Thailand, especially the North-eastern region (Lapanun, 2019; Sunanta & Angeles, 2013; Tosakul, 2010). In contrast, there is a paucity of research focusing on diversity within the lived realities of transnational marriage experienced by their more highly educated female compatriots who come from more elevated socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., Butratana & Trupp, 2021). The aforementioned portrayals tend to replicate negative stereotypes and stigma with regard to their transnational partners and their families in the country of origin. Hence, and in accordance with the aim of this Special Issue, this paper's objective is to fill some of the gaps and to challenge such stereotypes in the case of Europe-Thailand transnational migration.

Conceptually, this paper applies the perspectives of mobility, gender, and ageing to analyze Thai-Dutch couples' social and geographical trajectories of mobility from the Netherlands to Thailand. The intersection of these concepts contributes to the recognition that their mobility and relocation to Thailand are not only a linear

movement from one place to another. Rather, they are related to the women's previous marriage migration to the Netherlands and are interwoven with gender and ageing phenomena. This paper also explores the important role of mobility capital, which refers to the abilities and resources that migrants mobilize and accumulate during their trajectories of migration and mobility (Kaufmann et al., 2004; Kou & Bailey, 2014), in facilitating Thai-Dutch couples' imaginations, perceptions, and possibilities for their relocation to Thailand. Methodologically, this paper presents the interview data of Thai women from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, which goes some way to deconstructing the negative stereotypes associated with Thai-European transnational marriages and presents a more nuanced understanding of these couples' mobility and lived trajectories.

PERSPECTIVES ON MOBILITY

The mobilities paradigm or the so-called mobility turn has emerged to critique the limitations of previous migration studies, which applied a sedentarism view to delineate stability as normal and mobility as abnormal (Faist, 2013; Sheller, 2014). Such perspectives on sedentarism locate bounded places, regions or nations as the fundamental basis of human identity and experience, as well as constituting the basic units of social research (Sheller & Urry, 2006, pp. 208-209). In such approaches, migration is often perceived as problematic and immigrants are treated as the 'Other', who must be controlled through migration policies and integration processes (Cresswell, 2006). Moreover, migration in most cases is not a linear geographical movement from one country to another (Cresswell, 2010; Faist, 2013; Rangkla, 2019). Research on transnationalism highlights migrants' maintenance of socio-economic, political and familial linkages across nation states (Schiller et al., 1992; Yeoh, 2021). However, migrants' physical and socio-economic movement in daily life, their accumulation of mobility capital to be mobile both spatially and socially, and their imagination of potential movement are somewhat overlooked in existing research. Finally, there are limitations with the classification of types of (international) migration and mobility such as immigration, emigration, return migration, retirement migration, long-stay tourism and lifestyle migration, which increasingly overlap and intertwine (Butratana et al., 2022; Cassarino, 2004; De Hass et al., 2015; Hunter, 2011).

The mobilities paradigm can lend a more subtle understanding of migration and transnationalism. The concept of mobility encompasses both the large-scale movement of people, objects and capital across the globe, as well as the more local processes of daily transportation, movements in public spaces within everyday life and activities that occur while on the move (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 1; Sheller & Urry, 2006). It also encompasses digital and communicative mobilities, infrastructures, and systems of governance that enable or disable movement (Sheller, 2014, p. 789). However, recent studies also criticize a mobility bias in migration research by suggesting that structural and personal forces increasingly restrict migratory movements and individual mobility (Schewel, 2020).

Nation-state border controls and visa and immigration regimes based on citizenship led to differing levels freedom of travel (Bianchi et al., 2020; Bui & Trupp, 2020). At the same time, migrants build up mobility capital that they have accumulated for

years through past experiences of crossing borders (Moret, 2020). Mobility capital provides some people with opportunities for border crossing, increases their likelihood of engaging in activities in different places, and opens up the possibility of their moving back and forth across borders. Notably, having the ability to decide not to move is also a part of mobility capital (Moret, 2020, p. 236).

It should also be noted that mobility and gender are interwoven as they relate to the unequal and gendered power of ideologies and practices in facilitating or hindering mobility (Silvey, 2004). Feminist geographers were critical of nomadic theorists' assumptions about migration and mobility that were grounded in masculine subjectivities and privileged access to freedom of movement, while ignoring the gendered, sexualized, and racialized production of space (Sheller, 2014, p. 795; Silvey, 2004). This feminist critique intersects with the new mobilities paradigm in calling for attention to be given to unequal power relations, the politics of discourses and the practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis (Cresswell, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 211). These studies also question how (im)mobilities are (re)defined, practiced, and represented in relation to gender, class, race, age, ethnicities, and religious groups (Langevang & Gough, 2009; Lutz & Amelina, 2021; Sheller, 2014). Thus, the intersection of feminism and mobility studies yields a fruitful conceptual basis for migration and mobility research ranging from gender ideologies of personal mobility, gender and racial inequalities related to choice, and cases of (im)mobility. These are shaped by local and global processes, temporal and spatial encounters related to (im)mobility among migrants as well as by gender and power dynamics that shape movement across a range of geographic contexts (Anthias, 2012; Conlon, 2011; Silvey, 2004; Vaiou, 2012).

In this study, I utilize the perspectives of mobility and mobility capital in examining the mobility trajectories and accumulation of mobility capital of Thai-Dutch couples moving from the Netherlands to Thailand. The concept of *mobility* provides more subtle insights in the sense that the Thai-Dutch couples' spatial movement should not be viewed as merely a linear border crossing from one country to another that precedes a new, sedentary phase of their lives. Rather, this concept allows for a further exploration of their imagining of, and preparation for, their future mobility, and much that occurs both before and after their actual move that includes their physical and socio-economic movement in daily life. The perspective of mobility capital is also enlightening in this study because it underlines the continuous and dynamic process of (im)mobility. In other words, it demonstrates that mobility capital has already been cultivated even before the actual movement to, and after relocation in, Thailand. Furthermore, the notion of mobility capital is utilized to explore its interchangeability and interrelation with other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), whether it acts to trigger or constrain transnational partners' (im)mobility, socio-economic mobility, daily living conditions, and future plans for negotiating care. Finally, I combine a gender and ageing perspective with concepts of mobility and mobility capital to analyze their interconnectedness to shaping Thai-Dutch couples' motivations, imaginings, and practices of relocation to Thailand. Specifically, I consider gender and ageing through cultural notions of the family, which can differ markedly between transnational spouses. All these analytical perspectives provide a better understanding of diverse motivations for moving, of the influence of gender

relations and ageing on decisions on (im)mobility, as well as how gender, ageing, and socio-economic status affect the accumulation of mobility capital.

METHOD

This paper forms part of a qualitative research project entitled *Lived Experiences and Mobilities of Thai Women from the Netherlands to Thailand*. My data draws primarily on in-depth and open-ended interviews with 12 Thai women and six of their respective Dutch male partners who moved from the Netherlands to Thailand and currently reside there. Specifically, half of the 12 women were previously interviewed for my master's thesis (Suksomboon, 2004) and Ph.D. dissertation (Suksomboon, 2009) while I lived in the Netherlands between 2002 to 2009. After returning to Thailand, I still kept in touch with them via social media and met with them sometimes when they holidayed in Thailand. Over time, some of the Thai women and their Dutch partners returned to Thailand and I contacted them to conduct interviews for this research. The other six women were introduced through social networks of Thai migrant women who recently lived either in the Netherlands or in Thailand. My position as a Thai woman who used to study in the Netherlands and who had developed friendships with some of the Thai women interviewed over several years acted to facilitate access and rapport. On the other hand, my status as a scholar, asking personal questions about family relations, their pensions, health insurance, and the like, initially caused some hesitancy in Thai-Dutch couples, particularly those who only knew me via introductions from their Thai, female friends. However, I earned their trust through sharing my previous experiences of residing in the Netherlands and the benefit of repeated contact.

All 12 interviews were conducted in Thai or in English between February and December 2020 in Thailand. As a way of diversifying the pool of informants, I considered attributes such as age, (past) marital status, educational level, socio-economic status, duration of stay in the Netherlands, and duration of residing in Thailand. To protect the identity of the respondents, all names in this paper are fictitious. The interview data were coded and analyzed in relation to its conceptual foundations, consisting of mobility, gender, ageing, and mobility capital. Furthermore, the similarities and differences of the Thai-Dutch spouses' socio-economic backgrounds, such as age, economic status, educational attainment, family relations, and the duration of their residence in Thailand in shaping their motivation to relocate to Thailand, as well as their continuous accumulation of mobility capital are taken into account for the data analysis. Extracts of the life histories of Thai-Dutch transnational partners and quotations from their interviews are presented to support the data analysis and discussion.

At the time of the interviews, the 12 Thai women ranged in age from 39 to 77 years old. Five women were single before migrating to the Netherlands and the remaining seven were either divorced or separated from a Thai partner. Four of the seven women who were in relationships with Thai men before emigrating had children. Three of the 12 women had completed their primary education, three had attended a secondary or vocational school, two had acquired a bachelor's degree at a university in Thailand and the remaining four had received a master's degree or doctoral degree

in the USA, England, or the Netherlands. The women originally came from diverse regions including northern, north-eastern, central, and southern Thailand. Seven of the 12 women met their Dutch partner while he was on a holiday or business trip in Thailand, four met their Dutch spouses visiting family members or friends residing in the Netherlands, and only one met her Dutch husband through an internet website.

The ages of the Dutch partners ranged from 56 to 77 years old. Their past marital statuses varied: Six of the 12 men had never been married and the rest had been married to Dutch women and were fathers to children born to former partners. The occupations of their Dutch husbands while they worked in the Netherlands varied from factory manager to engineer, government official, owner of a small business, journalist and factory worker.

MOTIVATIONS TO RETURN: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN MOBILITY, GENDER, AND AGEING

The gendered phenomenon of Thai-Dutch transnational marriages and both-ways migration pathways is briefly presented. Mainstream Thai migration to the Netherlands is a relatively recent phenomenon, having started in the late 1970s (ten Brummelhuis & Stengs, 2007). This contemporary flow predominantly involved Thai women marrying Dutch men. It was largely the result of globalization, mass tourism in Thailand, economic difficulties in the agricultural sector at home, and an increased demand for labor in the service sector in urban Thailand (Lapanun, 2019; Statham, 2020; Suksomboon, 2009; Tosakul, 2010). Recently, the reverse flow of these Thai-Dutch partners moving back to Thailand has become apparent. It is difficult to know the exact number of Dutch migrants in Thailand due to blurry and problematic boundaries when categorizing between a tourist, an expat, and a migrant. However, data acquired through staff working at the Dutch Embassy in Bangkok estimated the numbers of the Dutch migrants in Thailand to have been around 20,000 in 2020. Census surveys show that 192,000 Western foreigners resided in Thailand in 2002, numbers that increased to 260,000 in 2010, with 75% of them being male (Husa et al., 2014; Lafferty & Maher, 2020, p. 1635).

Based on my interview data, all 12 women had migrated and resided with their Dutch spouses in the Netherlands for periods of between five and 31 years before moving back to Thailand. Currently, the women and their Dutch husbands have been living in Thailand from between three and 12 years. Their residences are scattered around Thailand, including places such as Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Bangkok, Nakhon Pathom, Rayong, Chanta Buri, and Krabi. The Thai-Dutch spouses' motivations to move back to Thailand are explored in the following sections.

Reaching the life transition through ageing is one of the most important forces driving the transnational partners to relocate to Thailand. Prior to their move to Thailand, six Dutch husbands decided to take early retirement, while only one had met retirement age as regulated by the Dutch pension system. A warm climate, having sunlight year-round, a convenient lifestyle, as well as cheaper taxes were all factors taken into account when the Thai-Dutch partners made the decision to move to Thailand. Thai government policies have underwritten a new direction in the Thai tourist industry by promoting Thailand as a global medical hub as well as a favored

destination for long stay tourism (Sunanta & Jaisuekun, 2022) and have enhanced the popularity of Thai tourism, leading to a scattering of foreign enclaves in many parts of Thailand. In turn, these new enclaves have boosted many local businesses who respond to foreigners' needs. The Dutch husbands felt that this atmosphere allowed them to indulge in both local Thai and international lifestyles. Additionally, the amount of their pensions after deducting wage tax ranged from around EUR 1,000 to 3,000 per month[1] (together with their own savings), and can allow the couples to have decent, comfortable lifestyles in Thailand, which would be difficult if they remained in the Netherlands. Recently, however, these Dutch husbands noticed that the cost of living in Thailand has gradually increased. This was the case with Arjan (73 years old) and Nang (49 years old) who returned and have lived in Thailand for 11 years. Nang graduated from secondary school, originates from Nakhon Ratchasima, and has one 22-year-old daughter from her previous marriage with a Thai man. Arjan was previously married to a Dutch woman, has three adult children (now with their own children), and later divorced. Arjan and Nang first met each other in Belgium in 2003, when Nang travelled there under a tourist visa. After marriage and migration to the Netherlands, Nang was a housewife and Arjan worked as a government official in the military. When Nang had resided in the Netherlands for five years and Arjan was 62 years old they moved to Thailand:

> I should have retired at the age of 65 in accordance with the Dutch pension regulations at that time. I searched for the pension information and found out that I could retire earlier. Even though I wouldn't receive the full amount of the pension payment if I retired early, the amount that I obtained is enough for us to enjoy our life in Thailand. I love warm weather, friendliness of Thais, and vibrant lifestyles. We bought a plot of land right next to Nang's mother in Nakhon Ratchasima many years ago and built our house two years ago before moving back to Thailand. (Arjan, interview, 20 February 2020)

The distinctive age gap within most of these cross-cultural marriages has significant impact on the Thai-Dutch couples' individual preferences regarding their mobility to Thailand. Although the Thai women do plan for their future return, many of them were hesitant to return so soon in the face of their Dutch husband's strong determination to move to Thailand. The ages of their Dutch husbands when they first arrived in Thailand were between 57 and 70 years old, while the women's ages were between

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1   The Dutch pension system constitutes three pillars: the universal old age state pension (AOW), the work-related pension, and the private commercial pension provision. The basic state pension (first pillar) is provided to all Dutch citizens at the age of 65 in the form of a flat-rate pension benefit, which in principle guarantees 70% of the net minimum wage. Although there is no obligation for employers to make pension commitments to their employees, the vast majority of those employed in the Netherlands (over 90%) participate in an occupational pension scheme. If the collective labor agreement lasts for 35 to 40 years, the total pension benefit will be around 70% of the final salary, including the first pillar benefit. The third pillar of the Dutch pension system consists of the individual pension provisions. These are obtained from insurance companies offering schemes for individual pension provisions. They can be obtained through annuity or endowment insurance (Suksomboon, 2009). The amount of pension that interviewed Dutch husbands received varied by the wage tax of the pension, the duration of living and working in the Netherlands, and their living arrangement (living alone, living with others, or living outside the Netherlands). For more information, see https://www.svb.nl/en/aow-pension (Sociale Verzekeringsbank, 2022).

their late thirties and early fifties. Having lived in the Netherlands from between five and 31 years, these Thai women had become familiar with the Dutch way of life, had built up their careers, and cultivated strong social networks with Thai female friends and acquaintances. Given these circumstances, electing immobility by remaining in the Netherlands for the time being appeared to be the more favored option for most (10 of 12) interviewed women rather than realizing actual mobility by returning to Thailand.

Research on trans-border marriages illuminates the influence of gender roles in determining who will move (Anthias, 2012; Lu Chia-Wen, 2005; Statham, 2020). In other words, the women, as wives, are expected to be the person to migrate and follow their husband to his country of origin. The cases of the Thai-Dutch both-ways migration pathways are not an exemption to this pattern. Initially, all the women experienced marriage migration to the Netherlands in order to build a transnational partnership with their Dutch husbands and experience socio-economic mobility. Later, their husbands wished to move to Thailand. Despite their initial hesitations, 11 of the interviewed women felt that they, as dutiful wives, should fulfill their husband's wish to migrate. As a result, these women finally agreed with their spouse to move back to Thailand.

While nearly all of the women 'fulfilled' their gender role as wives by following their partner to Thailand, only one interviewed woman who experienced marital separation decided to move to Thailand on her own. Taking the cultural notion of the family in Dutch society into account, the distinctive family relationships are reflected in two different terms: *gezin* and *familie*. The former denotes the conjugal family, which consists of spouses and minor children, whereas the latter is composed of extended relatives (consanguineal). The *gezin* is the first priority of a married couple (Brown, 2016; Ganesh, 2005). Due to this family norm, the women's frequent sociality with their Thai-Dutch adult children, who married and had their own children, gradually decreased. When the woman became old-aged and widowhood with the lack of daily support from their adult children, their spatial movement to Thailand was deemed to be a reasonable alternative. It should be additionally noted that in this case none of the adult children, either the Thai-Dutch or those born from the women's previous marriages and had followed their mother to the Netherlands, had returned to Thailand with their parents. This pattern is exemplified by Jib who graduated secondary school, is currently 61 years old, and returned to Thailand for six years. After she married and migrated to the Netherlands in 1985, she had many jobs including domestic work, sales, and waitressing. In 2004, she started her own business by running a Thai restaurant in Amsterdam with her husband's investment:

> Our restaurant was very popular, and we got a lot of customers. Running the business together created marital tensions for years and finally led to our divorce. My daughter has three children and lives in the Netherlands. I had nothing to worry about her. I decided to sell the Thai restaurant that I had run for 11 years. I lived there for 35 years. It is my second home. I was heart-broken to leave the Netherlands. I felt like I was leaving home (the Netherlands) and I was coming home (Thailand) at the same time. Anyhow, I think it is like a new beginning for me to move back to Thailand. (Jib, interview, 12 August 2020)

After returning, Jib gradually invested some of her savings in buying some properties in Thailand. She bought a house in the same neighborhood as her brother in a suburb of Bangkok. She also bought a unit in a condominium in Sukhumvit, located in the central business district of Bangkok, and rented the room to expats to earn some extra monthly income. She travelled back and forth between Bangkok and Nakhon Sawan in central Thailand to provide care for her 85-year-old mother. Therefore, marriage migration provided her with opportunities to accumulate mobility capital in terms of savings over the years. In the later stage of her life, she could activate this mobility capital for her actual return to Thailand and engage in local investments. These savings have also been transformed into mobility capital, which funds her translocal mobilities within Thailand to fulfill her gender role as a dutiful daughter.

In contrast to the women aged between their late thirties and early fifties, those in their early sixties were less reluctant to engage in mobility to return home. However, they also felt some initial regret about leaving the Netherlands. These women and their Dutch husbands both became older at a similar time and recognized the uncertainty of their late life course. If the Thai women remained in the Netherlands, it would be very difficult for them, as older migrants, trying to overcome grief and deal with all official documents in Dutch by themselves should their husbands pass away before them. In addition, an asymmetrical reciprocity and morality of *bun-khun* relations, the children's gratitude to the parents, are imposed heavily on daughters in Thai society (Brown, 2016). The women's obligation to take care of their parents' well-being is one of the motivations that once drove their marriage migration to the Netherlands. In the later phase of the women's life cycle, this gender role of being a dutiful daughter also propels them to return to Thailand to care for their aged parents. Therefore, returning to Thailand with their Dutch spouse allows them to some extent to be reliant on their relatives in times of calamity and also fulfill their lifelong familial obligation of being a dutiful daughter, as described by Aoi below.

Aoi (recently 61 years old) completed primary school and later married a Thai man. However, they divorced after 10 years and had no children. In 1995, her female Thai friend who lived in the Netherlands invited her for a three-month holiday to the Netherlands and introduced her to Henk who worked as an engineer. He had been married to a Dutch woman, had two children, and later separated. After a year-long relationship, Aoi married Henk and migrated to the Netherlands in 1996. After residing in the Netherlands for 20 years, they returned to Thailand and have been residing in Nakhon Pathom for five years:

> I stayed in the Netherlands for 20 years. I had a major role in assisting the Thai community to arrange many Buddhist ceremonies at the Thai temple in Waalwijk for many years. I knew and maintained good relations with many Thai female friends. I felt very sad to leave the Netherlands. It is a good choice for us to move back though. Henk is now 67 years old. In case he died, it would be very difficult for me to live alone there. After returning to Thailand for two years, I made a short trip to Surin (the Northeastern Thailand) and stayed there six months with my mother who had chronic sickness and gave her daily care until the end of her life. I felt very proud of myself to always be a dutiful daughter. (Aoi, interview, 27 July 2020)

Economic motivation is highlighted as one of the main factors encouraging migrants to migrate from the less-developed Global South to the more-developed regions of the Global North. In contrast, return migration to some degree involves the reverse flow of migrants from the Global North to the Global South, and is likely to be portrayed as the later-life spatial movement of retired, ageing migrants (Cassarino, 2004; De Hass et al., 2015; Hunter, 2011). My findings question such stereotypes by revealing that some Thai-Dutch couples moved from the Netherlands (regarded as a relatively affluent Western country) to Thailand (regarded as a developing nation), in their quest for economic advancement and other kinds of new opportunities that were available to them (see also similar findings in Botterill, 2017; Husa et al., 2014). This study also stresses that some transnational spouses who opted for mobility from the Netherlands to Thailand are not necessarily retired pensioners. Rather, their ages range from their mid-thirties to early fifties when returned. Uneven and ever-changing political and economic forces across the globe have shaped migrants' diverse practices of (im)mobilities.

The economic crisis in Europe between 2008 and 2012 has been the most severe economic recession since the Great Depression. This crisis was affected by increasing private debt accumulated in current account deficits and in mortgage credits, house-price inflation, and an overheated financial market. Regions that were flourishing before the crisis were then hit in more than one way: relatively well-paid work in construction-related sectors disappeared, middle class households were left in negative equity, and white-collar workers lost their jobs (Crescenzia et al., 2016, p. 15). Because of the lasting impacts of the economic recession and the high unemployment rate in the Netherlands, some Thai women and their Dutch partners, aged between their mid-thirties and early fifties, became unemployed during this period. As there appeared to be a tendency for gradually growing labor demands in the Asian market, these couples envisioned more job opportunities for them if they enacted their mobility to Asia.

Prominently, transnational marriage plays a significant role in the selection of Thailand as the relocation destination since Thailand is the women's motherland and the place where the women already have familial and social networks. The Dutch husbands are to some degree familiar with living conditions in Thailand due to their previous regular holidays to Thailand. From their points of view, moving back to Thailand thus seems to be the most logical pathway. The life history of Nok is an example. Nok (39 years old) and her Dutch husband Jaap (57 years old) have been married for 12 years and have two daughters aged five and seven years respectively. They have been living in Thailand for three years. She migrated to the Netherlands to pursue her master's degree in hotel management in 2007 and met Jaap there. After five years in the Netherlands, Nok and her two daughters followed Jaap to India since he was offered work as an engineer in the petroleum industry there:

> After we lived in India for four years, we returned to the Netherlands. Because of the economic recession, many employees in the company were laid off and Jaap was unfortunately one of them. He was finally hired as a freelance consultant and made trips sometimes to Asia. We thought that moving to Thailand is more convenient for him to do business trips to Malaysia and Brunei. We

were worried about our daughters' adjustment and their education at first, but kids can adjust easily wherever they live. Then, we chose to reside in Krabi, my home province. As Krabi is a well-known tourist site for foreigners, I applied my experience in hotel management and took cooking courses in Bangkok. Then, I opened a restaurant to sell Western foods and drinks. (Nok, interview, 27 December 2020)

CONTINUOUS ACCUMULATION OF MOBILITY CAPITAL

The women and their Dutch husbands' relocation to Thailand became possible as a result of the women's prior marriage migration to the Netherlands and their accumulation of mobility capital while residing there. Mobility scholars draw on Bourdieu's (1986) ideas to highlight the convertible attribute of different forms of capital. These migrants have accumulated diverse mobility experiences and skills that they can capitalize on by converting their cross-border practices into other types of capital and vice versa (Moret, 2020, p. 239). Remarkably, while residing in the Netherlands, many Thai women, especially from rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds, worked very hard to earn their own income as much as possible, reflecting their attempts to build up economic capital. They felt that they could count on this economic capital, combined with their husband's pension, when they returned to Thailand in the future. Nearly all of the women interviewed had broadened their knowledge and also put a lot of effort into meeting the required criteria of the integration regimes (such as passing the specified compulsory levels of Dutch language and the integration examination) in order to be granted Dutch citizenship and to obtain a Dutch passport. To some extent, this legal capital can secure the women's legal residency in the Netherlands, offering them some old-aged pension according to the duration of residence and work that they have built up; it also affords them temporal cross-border mobility to many countries without a tourist visa.

Mobility capital had also been continuously accumulated by these migrants across transnational social fields. All of the Thai women interviewed, especially those less educated ones from rural backgrounds, uphold their filial obligations by providing for their families in Thailand via regular remittances, which range from EUR 100 to 700 per month. For many years, their family's well-being had been improving, reflecting the convertibility of economic capital into the advancement of the natal family's social mobility. The accumulation of economic, legal, and social capital across borders therefore leads to mobility capital, which enables the transnational partners to gain access to and support for their actual movement to Thailand as well as other forms of temporal mobilities such as short holiday trips in Thailand and overseas.

Although marriage migration narrows the socio-economic disparity among Thai migrant women, access to and the accumulation of mobility capital among them is uneven. Specifically, while residing in the Netherlands, some less-educated women with rural origins are obliged to send regular remittances to their family members in Thailand for many years, affecting the cumulative amount of their own savings for the future. With limits on their finances, the women and their Dutch spouses are likely to reside near the women's family in their hometowns after their relocation to Thailand. The price of land and the cost of house construction in rural areas

are relatively lower than those in the tourist cities. Locating their residence in the women's hometown also suits their preference for a rural way of life and their inter-dependence on reciprocal familial relations. Although many women from rural and less-educated backgrounds were unable to accumulate a large amount of savings, they felt that their marriage migration, pension, and mobility capital that they had amassed did enable them to have a decent lifestyle after moving back to Thailand. Their experience and knowledge of living overseas for many years and their improved English and Dutch language fluency also enhanced their confidence and self-esteem. These benefits and opportunities could not be achieved if they had not experienced marriage migration and had remained in Thailand. These factors are evident in the life story of Sai (46 years old). Sai met Jasper (56 years old) when he vacationed in Thailand in 2001. They first met at an internet café in Bangkok, where Sai worked as a cashier. In 2003, Sai married Jasper and migrated to the Netherlands with her son from a previous marriage with a Thai man. Sai and Jasper ran their own business providing booth rentals for exhibitions in the Netherlands:

> While I was residing in the Netherlands, I gradually bought a plot of land near my hometown in Nakorn Rachasima and finally owned 10 Rai (around 3.9 ac) in total. The economic recession in the Netherlands (starting in 2008) had an impact on our business. Jasper would like to move to Thailand. We started to build two houses and to grow fruit trees on the pieces of land we bought in Thailand under the supervision of my brother in Thailand (in 2010). We moved to Thailand in 2012. I only graduated vocational school. If I would have re-mained in Thailand, I don't think I would have been able to improve my family's well-being. As Jasper didn't receive the old age pension yet, I earned an income from being an informal property agent and selling fruit from our own farm. (Sai, interview, 24 July 2020)

The Thai migrant women with higher educational qualifications encountered dif-ficulties in securing highly skilled work when they first arrived in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, they attempted to improve their skills and knowledge by attending Dutch language and job training courses regularly. Some of them were later recruited to work in airline ticketing, bank managing, and Thai language teaching. As their socio-economic status was originally middle class, they remitted money to their par-ents irregularly. After moving back to Thailand, they were likely to buy a dwelling through a property development company in tourist cities such as Hua Hin, Rayong, and Chiang Mai. Compared to the women with rural origins, women with middle class backgrounds are not only the main financial support for their elderly parents. Their siblings share medical and long-term care expenses for their parents. As a result, women like Pan were able to achieve a relatively comfortable lifestyle in Thailand. Pan (68 years old) graduated with a master's degree in education in the U.S.A. and used to work as a government officer at the Ministry of Education. She married Theo (67 years old) and moved to the Netherlands in 1990. After attending a compulsory Dutch language course and several other training courses over four years, Pan was able to be a Thai language teacher and Thai-Dutch translator. Theo, a freelance jour-nalist, received a job offer to make documentaries in South-East Asia for a Dutch Television company, so they decided to move to Thailand in 2008:

> My parents own a big piece of land in Sukhumvit (Bangkok). After Theo and
> I returned to Thailand, my mother asked me to build my own house in the
> same compound as her house, like my younger sister did. I refused to do so as it
> would be more convenient for Theo to have privacy. We decided to buy a house
> from a house development project in Hua Hin. Property is more expensive
> in a touristic city. With the money we gained from selling our house in the
> Netherlands, we can afford it though. As my father worked as a government of-
> ficer, he received a pension and medical payments when ill. My brother worked
> as a flight manager in the airlines. I didn't need to send regular remittances
> to my parents and family when I was in the Netherlands. Without any regu-
> lar financial burden with the family, l was able to save. Anyway, as a dutiful
> daughter, I have to provide daily care to my parents. I sometimes travel from
> Hua Hin to Bangkok on the weekends to spend time and care for my parents.
> (Pan, interview, 11 July 2020)

The trajectories of mobilities occur not only when migrants undertake actual geo-
graphical movement, but also when they imagine and plan for their future mobility
while they are currently immobile. Returning to Thailand is not a sudden life event;
the Thai-Dutch spouses instead envisage this future mobility through waiting,
arranging many activities, and investing resources in making their plan come to frui-
tion. While earning their living in the Netherlands, they had spent time, ranging from
one to six years, to prepare for their actual relocation to Thailand. For example, when
they had holidays in Thailand every year, they spent time looking for land or visiting
the housing property sites that might be their residence after moving back. For the
women who bought large, vacant plots of land nearby their family's residence, their
close kin would supervise their house construction and the planting of a fruit farm.
These Thai-Dutch couples visited once or twice a year to check on the progress of
their house construction. After the construction was completed, they would stay in
their own house when they came on holidays to Thailand and later they resided there
after moving back to Thailand. Of the 12 Thai-Dutch couples interviewed, only two
spouses still kept both dwellings, one in the Netherlands and one in Thailand. Those
who sold their house or terminated their house/apartment rental contract argued
that it is very costly and requires maintenance to keep both residences in Thailand
and the Netherlands.

Findings from my study demonstrate that Thai-Dutch couples' relocation to
Thailand should not be regarded as merely a unidirectional movement from the
Netherlands to Thailand during a supposed sedentary stage. Instead, my research
challenges the existing stereotype of sedentariness in Thai-European marriage
migration. In other words, the return to the homes of these women does not signify
the ending of their mobility and permanent settlement. Rather, their trajectories of
mobilities also encompass the continued moving back and forth between Thailand
and the Netherlands as well as the local process of daily spatial movement, which
are shaped by the gender roles of being a wife and a daughter. For instance, after
Noi (55 years old) had lived in the Netherlands for 20 years, she and Johan (75 years
old) moved to Thailand for six years. When she was in the Netherlands, she worked
at a bank. In 2012, she was unemployed when she agreed to Johan's wish to move to
Thailand. However, their mobility increased even further:

> I got a job offer at the Bank in Singapore in 2013 and I decided to move there, while Johan lived in a unit of the condominium near the beach in Rayong [a province in the coastline of the Thai gulf]. When the year contract ended, I was recruited to work as a financial product development manager for the international market at the bank's head office located in the central business district of Bangkok. I rented a room in an apartment with a walking distance to my office and I lived there during the week. Every Friday evening, I drove from Bangkok to Rayong to spend some time with Johan. I returned on Sunday afternoon and visited my mother in Nonthaburi [in a suburb of Bangkok]. (Noi, interview, 8 February 2020)

Choices and control over their mobility and immobility in the ageing stage of the life cycle among the Thai-Dutch couples varied unequally according to their accumulated mobility capital, their marital relations, the spouse's relationship with Thai family members, and potential resources for taking care of their elders. The Thai-Dutch couples who earned a good income from their skilled occupations during their time in the Netherlands received a generous pension and had enough savings for the potential for more alternatives in their mobility, immobility, and provision of aged care. For instance, Johan (75 years old) worked as a shoe designer and Noi (55 years old) worked at the bank in the Netherlands and they had accumulated a decent amount in terms of pensions and savings. They were able to buy a spacious condominium unit in Rayong, Thailand and kept their house in the Netherlands:

> I like to keep our house in the Netherlands as well. If you buy health insurance in the Netherlands, you are required to have your name under a house registration in the Netherlands. Health insurance in Thailand is expensive for aged foreigners. There are many exemptions in the coverage too. Health insurance in the Netherlands is more reliable in terms of claims. I make a trip to the Netherlands every year and have stayed there for one to two months to organize documents, tax payments, and house maintenance. If it is possible, I prefer to remain in Thailand and hire a live-in maid to provide me with daily care under the supervision of Noi in the last stage of my life. (Johan, interview, 8 February 2020)

Seven Dutch husbands in this study have resided in Thailand without health insurance. They used to have health insurance when they initially migrated to Thailand. However, the Thai insurance companies had many claim exemptions, and international insurance companies were very expensive depending on their age, health conditions, and coverage. Without health insurance, if they have a minor illness, they can visit a private hospital or a clinic. However, Dutch husbands with less pension and savings would visit the government hospital in the case of severe sickness. Significantly, all the Dutch men interviewed expected to rely on their Thai wives for care in their old age. None of them mentioned their adult children or relatives in the Netherlands as potential resources for support as they aged; this illuminates their experiences of precarity in terms of their access to medical services and elderly care in Thailand (Botterill, 2017; Jaisuekun & Sunanta, 2016; Lafferty & Maher, 2020). As demonstrated by Arjan's account:

You can see that many male foreigners are likely to be much older than their Thai wives. When I get older, I expect my wife [Nang] to care for me. If Nang would pass aways before me, my daughter-in-law and Nang's relatives, who live not far from us, might come to take care of me. Anyhow, if I needed intensive daily care for many years, I am not sure if I could rely on them. If it is possible, my preference is to die before Nang. I want to live the rest of my life and die in Thailand. I reserved my grave-to-be in the cemetery at one church in Nakorn Rachasima. (Arjan, interview, 20 February 2020)

CONCLUSION

This paper utilizes the notions of mobility, mobility capital, gender, and ageing to shed light on the interrelationship between migrants' marriage migration and their subsequent experiences of return migration. I illustrate this dynamic through the cases of Thai-Dutch transnational marriages and their movements from the Netherlands to Thailand. These examples underline the interplay between gender, ageing, and the unequal socio-economic, global forces that shape the transnational spouses' perceptions and practices of the mobility of return. The Thai women aged between their late thirties and the early fifties were initially reluctant to return to Thailand, while their Dutch husbands who had reached the age of retirement wished to do so. In contrast, the women in their sixties or above agreed with their ageing husband to return home, as they took their later life stage into account and their possible dependency on their natal kin in times of crisis. However, the most significant factor in determining the women's ultimate decision to move back to Thailand was the expected gender roles: as a wife who should follow her husband, and as a dutiful daughter who has a responsibility to care for her elderly parents.

Moreover, migration and relocation are widely perceived to be the movement of retired, old-aged pensioners from the socioeconomically more developed Global North to the less developed Global South in their pursuit of better and convenient lifestyles (Green, 2015; Howard, 2008; Husa et al., 2014). This study illuminates the greater complexity of this phenomenon by highlighting the geographical mobility from the Netherlands to Thailand of younger Thai-Dutch couples (some of them relocated to Thailand with their little children) as they seek to acquire better economic opportunities in Thailand and Asia, as shaped by uneven and changing global economic influences.

Relocation to Thailand involves not only the migrants' spatial and social mobilities, but also the continuity of their accumulation of mobility capital across transnational fields. Thai-Dutch partners have both intentionally and unintentionally accumulated mobility experiences, skills, and resources, such as economic, social, and legal capital over the years and converted them into access to a broad range of potential and actual mobilities to Thailand. The resources and capital that the ageing couples have continuously accumulated across borders will probably provide them with the ability not to have to move and therefore die in Thailand. Thus, mobility capital is also associated with the migrant's ability to remain immobile (Moret, 2020) – in other words, not to move voluntarily. It should be noted that this mobility capital has been unequally accessible, and shaped by the migrants' socio-economic backgrounds and their changing marital and familial relations.

The concepts of mobility and mobility capital are useful because they improve our understanding of the complex interconnections between marriage migration and relocation to Thailand by Thai women and their European husbands. The practices of waiting, hesitation to move, imagining the return, preparing to move, having actually returned, travelling back and forth between Thailand and the Netherlands, as well as having local spatial movement in daily life signify the fluid, complicated and sometimes fragmented characteristics of the Thai-Dutch spouses' trajectories of mobility. The women's paradoxical sentiments about their return – that they felt as if they were "leaving home (the Netherlands) and coming home (Thailand) at the same time" – is well reflected in their trajectories of (im)mobility. Significantly, this paper explored a gender perspective and the mobilities paradigm to shed light on the crucial role played by a dynamic range of factors: unequal global, socio-economic and geographical power, gender ideology, cultural notions of the family, ageing, and mobility capital. All these elements shape the transnational partners' perceptions and practices of mobility and stasis both in global, local, and day-to-day contexts (Cresswell, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 211).

The lived experiences of Thai-European marriage couples who relocated to Thailand and are over 80 years old, which is considered to be at the latest ageing stage of the life-cycle, have been largely overlooked by existing research (e.g., Sunanta & Jaisuekun, 2022). Future research can further explore the consequences of demographic ageing of Thai-European couples, particularly in terms of examining their (im)mobility and their access to care at this frailer stage of life.

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Communication, Leadership, and Community-based Tourism Empowerment in Brunei Darussalam

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Effective communication plays a part in the success and the sustainability of tourism and hospitality management, including community-based tourism (CBT). In Brunei Darussalam, communication barriers have affected the growth of the CBT industry at both local and national levels. By analysing responses from 16 local CBT operators, this investigation focuses on aspects of communication and its channels in securing sustainability and empowerment of the CBT industry. This study found that the CBT ventures in Brunei include: (1) horizontal/lateral communication between CBT operators and surrounding communities; and (2) top-down communication and bottom-up accessibility between authorities, community leaders, and CBT owners. This paper further discusses how bureaucracy can impede the success of CBT operations, and how a collaborative approach between stakeholders has inspired the formulation of a new Interactional Model of Leadership and Empowerment among CBT stakeholders, which can be used to measure the efficacy of communication among stakeholders in the CBT industry.

Keywords: Community-based Tourism; Communication; Empowerment; Leadership; Sustainable Tourism

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INTRODUCTION

The growing literature on tourism and hospitality management has acknowledged the pivotal role of effective communication in supporting the development and success and securing the sustainability of the tourism industry (Aas et al., 2005; Dolezal, 2015; Grenna et al., 2006; Kokkranikal et al., 2011; Tölkes, 2018). Other studies have also recalled the significance of reviewing the efficacy of communication strategies between stakeholders to ensure an undisrupted process of sustainable leadership in the tourism and hospitality industry (Freeman, 2010; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2018; Sène-Harper & Séye, 2019; Zielinski et al., 2021), including those involving community-based tourism (CBT). Ideally, it is essential for successful and sustainable tourism development to foster a communication strategy that can identify how factors such as information, awareness, advocacy,

network building, conflict mitigation, and communication platforms can be supported (Grenna et al., 2006). These factors remain relevant in studies focusing on CBT that normally include discussions of community control, leadership and empowerment, and their contribution to the equality, well-being, conservation, and development of the surrounding community (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014).

According to ASEAN Community-Based Tourism Standards, CBT refers to the "tourism economic sector dominated by small businesses that provide goods and services to a visiting tourist clientele…while fostering equitable and mutually beneficial host-guest interaction" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, p. 1-2). This paper refers to CBT as "a form of tourism run by local community members which specifically focused on offering products and services in small-scale industry and hospitality" (Noorashid & Chin, 2021, p. 2). The components of formation, power control and decision-making, mutual interactions, and partnership, as well as participation from relevant stakeholders, are crucial to maintain the success and the sustainability of CBT operations.

Despite the small amount of literature on tourism in Brunei, previous studies have implied communication barriers as a hinderance to the growth of tourism in the country (Ahmad, 2015; Bhuiyan & Haji Abdul Wahab, 2018; Mohd. Kassim, 2003; Salleh, 2017). The Brunei Government has implemented various initiatives to boost the tourism sector, but the country still "appears to be left far behind in its tourism development and contribution, even by neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar" (Ahmad, 2015, p. 210). Whilst never proven at large, hierarchical and bureaucratic issues may be a major cause of the slow growth of the tourism and hospitality sector vis-a-vis the neighbouring countries.

Chin et al. (in press) provided evidence that the inefficacy of communication between tourism stakeholders has caused unequal distribution of equality and empowerment among community-based operators. This study argues for the need to have guidelines and frameworks to reduce such issues in the tourism industry in Brunei as it has happened in other countries (Dahles et al., 2020; Nyakiba et al., 2018; Sène-Harper & Séye, 2019; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). In addition, this paper attempts to fill in the research gap by exploring the causal inter-relationship between communication towards empowerment and securing the sustainability of CBT by focusing on the following research questions:

1. Why does communication play a pivotal role in securing the sustainability of the CBT industry?
2. How is empowerment channelled through communication between CBT stakeholders?
3. How do effective communication and equality secure the empowerment of CBT in Brunei?

By analysing responses from 16 local community-based tourism operators, this paper formulates an interactional model of communication and empowerment that can be used to overview and measure the efficacy of communication and relevant factors to be considered among stakeholders in the CBT industry, particularly in cases involving bureaucratic experiences. We believe that this model is highly relevant and applicable in other Southeast Asian and European contexts where further resolution is needed.

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM, TOURISM AND COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

Located on the northwest coast of Borneo, Brunei has an area of 5,769 square kilometres (2,227 square miles) and consists of four districts: Brunei-Muara, Belait, Tutong, and Temburong (see Figure 1). Brunei has a population of 453,600, with 336,000 (74%) being local Bruneians and the rest made up of permanent or temporary residents and expatriates (Brunei's Department and Economic Planning, 2021). Brunei adheres to its national philosophy *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy or MIB), which acts as the guidance and way of life for Bruneians.

Figure 1. Map of Brunei Darussalam (authors' copyright)

Brunei's economy mainly relies on the production and exportation of crude oil and natural gas, which account for 90% of the national economy, but the country is committed to develop its tourism industry to detach itself from dependence on its main exportations (Ahmad, 2015; Salleh, 2017). In 2007, Brunei joined the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) to strengthen its profile as an international tourist destination (Wassler & Weber, 2014).

Based on the Brunei Tourism Performance Final Report 2020, there was an increase in international visitor arrivals to Brunei from 4,060,174 in 2015 to 4,521,336 in 2018, but the numbers decreased drastically to 1,070,614 in 2020 due to the pandemic (Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism [MPRT], 2021). Brunei has recently shifted its focus to building its domestic tourism to overcome losses (Abu Bakar, 2020; Chin & Fatimahwati, 2021; Noorashid & Chin, 2021; Pehin Dato Musa & Chin 2022), such as developing campaigns in areas such as culinary experiences across Bruneian regions and leveraging new infrastructure such as the Temburong bridge, which connects the mainland to nature-based tourism products and services

(Azney, 2020; Mahmud, 2021). These efforts are strategized to promote tourism as a key sector for the Brunei Vision 2035, which is to position Brunei as a knowledge and service-led economy (MPRT, 2019).

Under the ASEAN CBT Standard, there has been an increase in the number of CBT establishments in Brunei in recent years, even as the concept of CBT is still relatively new and stipulated. Along with the rise of micro-small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) (CSPS, 2021a, 2021b; Mahmud, 2021), CBT is now recognised as an alternative form of tourism contributing to the growth of the national economy. However, to date, there is no specific legal framework for CBT in Brunei. Based on the CBT case studies in Brunei (Adli & Chin, 2021; Janaji & Ibrahim, 2019; Noorashid & Chin, 2021), there is no statistical evidence of CBT operations, as the capacity of CBT involvement is still new and undetermined. Nevertheless, Noorashid and Chin (2021) have found over 40 CBT operations that are involved in small-scale, community-based tourism enterprises (CBTEs), including cultural galleries/centres, lodges and homestays, and travel service providers/intermediaries. Therefore, this paper tries to formulate an interactional model of communication and empowerment to measure the efficacy of communication and relevant factors to be considered among stakeholders in the CBT industry.

This paper calls for further investigation on the formation of CBT in Brunei, as this knowledge is still underdeveloped. The uniqueness of CBT in Brunei and its correlation to power relations and equality distribution between stakeholders can be adapted to other countries with similar interests in using CBT as an alternative form of tourism to diversify their community and national economic growth targets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an overlap between the roles of communication and empowerment in the tourism and hospitality industry (Aas et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2012; Kokkranikal et al., 2011; Tölkes, 2018), particularly in CBT and entrepreneurial activities (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014; Sunuantari, 2017). Despite its growing literature, there is still a necessity to assess theoretical foundations, impacts, and outcomes of effective communication in tourism (Coles et al., 2013; Tölkes, 2018; Wehrli et al., 2017). Through effective communication and platforms to benefit relevant stakeholders (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Freeman, 2010; Sinh et al., 2016), CBT serves as a channel towards social justice and empowerment, equity of benefits and redistributive measures, holistic development of community, and reclaiming of ownership in the tourism industry today (Dolezal, 2015; Giampiccoli, 2020; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Mayaka et al., 2019).

In the hospitality industry, entrepreneurial success can be achieved by maintaining a sense of equality and inclusivity, while boosting community participation and sustainable development (Giampicolli & Mtapuri, 2017; Nordin et al., 2014; Zeppel, 2006). This is in line with one of the three major dimensions ensuring viable and successful tourism operations and fair distribution of socioeconomic benefits postulated by UNWTO, including stable employment, income earning opportunities, and social justice for communities (UNWTO, 2021). Empowerment involves multi-dynamic and context-dependent processes of enabling local communities to initiate ventures/

enterprises, and of owning power and control to manage, make decisions, mobilise resources and choose partnerships to achieve quality of life, socioeconomic well-being, and social justice (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Chin, 2017; Khalid et al., 2019; Nordin et al., 2014). In this case, providing equal access and equity in community participation also enhances empowerment in CBT industries (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Heimerl et al., 2010).

Although CBT is a self-participatory initiative, many studies highlight the importance of achieving common goals and getting external support from stakeholders (Asker et al., 2010; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Matilainen et al., 2018). Several global case studies further affirm the complexity of equality and empowerment between different stakeholders in achieving various levels of community empowerment (Anuar & Sood, 2017; Asker et al., 2010; Chin et al., 2017; Chin & Hampton, 2020). Nevertheless, issues of inequality and lack of empowerment can be resolved by streamlining goals and policies as long-term interests between stakeholders through the effective use of communication (Burgos & Mertens, 2017; Freeman, 2010; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2021; Stone, 2015; Tosun, 2006). Other studies reported that the sustainability of CBTEs can be measured by an understanding of bonding social capital – the dynamic relationship between small groups within larger groups in CBT (Dodds et al., 2016; Matilainen et al., 2018; Taylor, 2016). However, bureaucratic involvement and hierarchical communication have hindered the success of tourism activities especially involving CBT ventures (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Mayaka et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021; Salazar, 2012; Taylor, 2017), further raising discussions over the need to reclaim the power of formation, control and decision making for the community with enough intervention from other stakeholders (Fan et al., 2021; Giampiccoli, 2020; Giampiccoli, A., & Saayman, 2018; Tosun, 2000).

Communication has a significant role in supporting tourism and leadership (Grenna et al., Mishra et al., 2006; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Tölkes, 2018). This can happen through community engagement in exchanging knowledge and skills to maintain and support stakeholders, realising local tourism programmes and policy implementations, and empowering stakeholders in their planning and decision making (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Belz & Peattie, 2012; Freeman, 2010; Hardeman et al., 2017). Moreover, empowering CBT operations can foster high levels of confidence and motivation that will enable and ensure small-scale businesses to deliver their CBT products (Asker et al., 2010). Training of leadership styles and entrepreneurial skills is also important in CBT development and empowerment (Kayat et al., 2016; Ngo et al, 2018; Zapata et al., 2011). Previous scholarship also highlighted the necessity to develop communication skills among stakeholders to ensure effective performance of community tourism (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Raub & Robert, 2012). The challenges of maintaining equality and empowerment in CBT are identified as lack of knowledge, interest, and skills, as well as the perception of the local community towards CBT (Farrelly, 2011, Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2018; Petrić, 2017; Pusiran & Xiao, 2013), due to lack of communication between relevant stakeholders (Arasli et al., 2019; Bianchi, 2003; Ernawati et al., 2017). Nomnian et al. (2020) found that effective communication – from authorities to operators and to consumers – can be fostered when all relevant stakeholders are able to comprehend mutual roles and dependency, communicative needs, and sociocultural and linguistic identities.

Other contributing factors to the success of CBTE include the involvement of responsible community leaders, strong community-based associations, active participation among local, talented individuals, and effective communications (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Boley & McGehee, 2014; Chili & Ngxongo, 2017; Kayat et al., 2016; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). The tourism and hospitality sector should practice empowering leadership, such as leading by example, coaching, participative decision making, informing, and showing concern (Hon & Chan, 2012). Brownell (2010) claims global hospitality organisations are influenced by relatable behaviours, personal characteristics, and manner, and that empowered leadership should involve fostering interdependency and creativity among stakeholders (Giampiccoli et al., 2015; Yildiz et al., 2014).

In Brunei, issues surrounding tourism and hospitality studies are not discussed at great length in academic literature, and only three studies have investigated CBT affairs in Brunei (Adli & Chin, 2021; Janaji & Ibrahim, 2019; Noorashid & Chin, 2021). In short: Janaji and Ibrahim (2019) remarked on the economic empowerment of homestay owners as part of economic gain and development within community tourism; Adli and Chin (2021) explored the formation process of CBT products vis-à-vis mass tourism in Brunei; and Noorashid and Chin (2021) reported on unequal access to resources amid CBT operators' efforts in maintaining the resilience of their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst these studies have hinted at issues related to bureaucratic experiences in CBT, our current framework (see Figure 2) further reviews the effects of communication and leadership and pivotal interrelationship between important stakeholders affecting issues of equality and empowerment within CBT operations in Brunei.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation used a qualitative approach and purposive sampling. The data was collected by interviewing 16 local owners of CBT operations (see Table 1 for backgrounds of CBTE owners). A few CBT operations were contacted through the list of CBT operators from the official webpage of the Tourism Development Department Brunei (TDD, 2021) under the Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT) in Brunei, while others were selected due to their successful experiences as widely-known CBT operators. The face-to-face interviews took an hour on average and were conducted between March and April 2021 at the owners' CBT establishments. During this time, the country had almost no cases of COVID-19 community transmission, thereby allowing data to be collected in a safe and secure environment.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit the CBTE owners' experiences in managing CBTEs through personal and/or collective approaches (with the community), as well as their beliefs and attitudes towards the sense of ownership, empowerment, and procedures in their CBTEs. The interviews were conducted in either English or Brunei Malay language depending on the preference of the participants, where data in Brunei Malay were later translated for analysis. Content analysis was used to determine themes based on the salient features in the responses.

These approaches contributed to the emergence of new discussions and a designated framework that can be expanded for future investigations. Furthermore, these new findings can be reproduced in different contexts and settings. Ethical consent agreement between the researchers and the CBTE owners was made prior to the interviews. The participants also requested to remain anonymous in the writing of this paper.

Owners	Age	Gender	CBT Line of Work	District	Year Established
A	54	Female	Lodge	Brunei Muara	2015
B	52	Female	Homestay	Brunei Muara	2018
C	50	Male	Homestay	Brunei Muara	2009
D	46	Male	Lodge	Brunei Muara	2015
E	40	Female	Homestay	Brunei Muara	2012
F	52	Male	Homestay/cultural village	Brunei Muara	2015
G	36	Female	Travel service provider	Brunei Muara and Tutong	2018
H	26	Female	Cultural centre	Tutong	2012
I	64	Male	Homestay/cultural centre	Tutong	2017
J	56	Female	Homestay	Tutong	2010
K	40	Female	Homestay	Temburong	2011
L	67	Female	Guesthouse	Temburong	2006
M	59	Male	Guesthouse	Temburong	2014
N	69	Female	Guesthouse	Temburong	2001
O	25	Male	Lodge	Temburong	2020
P	76	Female	Homestay	Temburong	2007

Table 1. CBTE owners' demographic backgrounds and CBT lines of work

We acknowledge the limitations of our study, as investigation of communication events in tourism should be raised involving many stakeholders, including particularly the government and authorities, in discussions surrounding bureaucratic experiences. However, due to the restrictions during the second wave of the pandemic in August 2021 onwards, we believe the current study on CBT owners/operators can generate further discussions of the aspects of bureaucracy, communication, and participation from their perspectives.

We further justify this limitation by highlighting the importance of CBTE owners/operators' perspectives as being part of the community, and community aspects are the most significant factors in any CBT discussions and formations (Ramli et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016). CBT operations should involve dynamic partnerships from various stakeholders, but the management of this industry is largely based at the community level (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016; Yanes et al., 2019; Zapata et al., 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Following our early observations and research findings, we further formulated the following theoretical framework (see Figure 2) that shows the three important stakeholders of CBT management in leadership, empowerment, and communication, namely authorities, community leaders and CBT operators (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Asker at al., 2010; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014, 2018; Grenna et al., 2006; Noorashid & Chin, 2021). More discussion about the newly formulated framework can be found towards the end of this section.

Figure 2. Interactional Model of Leadership and Empowerment among CBT Stakeholders (authors' copyright)

Based on our research findings, the formation of leadership and empowerment in CBT management in Brunei strongly focusses on three aspects: (1) the relationship between CBT owner and subordinates, (2) the relationship between CBT owner and the local community, and (3) the relationship between CBT owner and authorities. All three aspects involve dynamic relationships, leadership and effective communication between tourism stakeholders affecting the prospects and the sustainability of CBT ventures that will be discussed in this section.

Open Communicative Leadership and Community Participation Secure CBT Sustainability

As most CBT ventures operate as small-scale and family-owned enterprises, they are managed by the owners themselves or among senior family members. Some CBTEs (specifically C, D, E, F, H, K and O) are operating as structured organisations. For instance, Owner E runs a homestay as part of a larger marine-tourism-based company, Owner F manages a large-scaled community homestay and Owner H operates a family-heritage cultural centre with multiple, traditional activities that cater to both local

and international tourists. These establishments tend to practise a more hierarchical structure and require more staff and hospitality workers to accommodate daily services and clients. Thus, there is a need to hire workers from local communities.

All CBTE owners practise a centralised-style leadership where they have much control over the management, decision making and work delegation among family members and/or the local employees. These owners claim such practices have secured the flow of business management, as none have reported any issues within operations. There is also less formality and a high level of flexibility and tolerance between CBTE owners and their employees, which is expected due to the nature of CBT.

As part of the small-scale tourism industry, CBT is highly manageable and resilient to challenges vis-à-vis mass tourism (Adam & Alarifi, 2021; Kampel, 2020; Liguori & Pittz, 2020; Sobaih et al., 2021). CBT formation is often practised to empower the role of the operators and surrounding communities (Dolezal, 2011, 2015; Giampiccoli, 2020; Mayaka et al., 2019). This is evident in our data, as all CBT owners claim to feel empowered from having control in internal management and decision making for their businesses while practising open, internal communication between the owners and their employees.

> Yes! He [the husband] started off the business and we train the people and our staff. We're quite flexible in what we do. Sometimes we have our tour guide doing the job as a snorkel guy, and then he's also looking after other things, amid also a boat captain. So, we are quite a flexible bunch and employees are happy having new roles depending on the demands of the market. In Brunei, it is very hard to get fixated in one area of expertise or services because of the seasonality. So, it's just not sustainable if we just focus on one thing. That's why we also shift and expand our business according to season. Obviously, there's a little bit difficult [following regulations], but essentially, I think we do have a lot of autonomy to do what we want. (Owner E)

> So, I am the manager in our team. I divide employees into different tasks. I usually ask them which area they prefer to get involved in, and then delegated the activities accordingly. But I will always tell them to be free to get involved in another activity to gain more experiences. Yes, I have the full authority to manage and to decide how the CBT-based establishment runs. (Owner H)

Fostering effective communication and leadership between CBTE owners and operators with the local community has been reported to contribute to community participation and collaborative efforts (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Cole, 2006; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014), which is also evident in the current study. These CBTE owners empower local communities by creating jobs for the retired communities, single mothers, and people with special needs.

According to the CBTE owners, the decision to hire local people is their own, with no intervention from other stakeholders. Moreover, employing a local workforce and volunteers from surrounding communities is seen as supporting the community and utilising the surrounding culture and natural resources.

> We provide many economic opportunities for our *penambang* [ferryman in Kampung Ayer- a cultural village]. Since the opening of our new hiking trails nearby, we have provided several jobs as tour guides for local people and pensioners. We also provide opportunities for our people and other people from nearby villages to sell their products and crafts here at our homestays and cultural centre. Besides, we also give opportunities for our young people to get involved in cultural activities and performances, and yes, they're being paid too. (Owner F)

> We've brought in many local staff. We also work with An-Nur Harapan [a local social enterprise providing vocational training for different abilities youth]. We work together for less able people. Once, we gave a guy a chance to be an apprentice, so he worked with us for three days, and then we offered him a part time job for three days a week. He's working with us now. We also accept a lot of interns as a way to develop our youth. We give them a little taste of what it's like to work in a private industry. (Owner E)

> ...what I try to focus on my business is more on youth development. I want the youth that are involved here to sharpen their skills in terms of communication and gaining income. We encourage them to sell their own products here, for example food products. But at the same time, I am also open to other individuals, especially the low income or whoever is interested to get involved. (Owner H)

Some CBTE owners further bolster the sense of community participation by engaging in social activities with the surrounding community, such as organising inspirational talks about setting up CBTEs, participating in family adoption schemes and accommodating international participants from the Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Programme. These activities are a way for the owners to give back to their communities, while also promoting their businesses.

> We get to showcase our culture to other people. I had the chance to accommodate participating youth from the Youth Ship programme, I took some of them as guests. I showed them our local culture, lifestyle, and food. I taught them how to make *Ambuyat* [a local dish made of tapioca starch] and *Kelupis* [a local snack made of glutinous rice rolls]. I show them our Bruneian culture. (Owner J)

> It was actually in December last year that we held a youth camp in collaboration with *Majlis Kesejahteraan Masyarakat* (Brunei's Council on Social Welfare). It's a non-government youth organisation for social welfare. I believe we have the same goal and mission. We want to help the community in Brunei too. So, they did a three-day and two-night camping here and we partially sponsored them by reducing the cost of staying in here. We helped them to enhance their activities here in Temburong. (Owner O)

In CBT, increasing community participation can strengthen the sense of empowerment and effective interactions in tourism activities (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Nordin et al., 2014; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). The charity-based accommodations provided by the CBTE owners in Brunei do not only operate as business ventures, but

they are also set up as charity drives to empower and provide economic opportunities for the surrounding communities. This has helped towards building a cooperative climate through effective communication between CBTE owners and their surrounding communities.

> We've been active for around six years now, and our most recent charity programme was just last week. We handed out basic necessities to the needy families, so it'd be easy for them to prepare them for Ramadan (fasting month). So yeah, we helped around 100 families in Brunei Muara, Tutong and Belait and we also provided assistance for 20 needy families here in Temburong as well. (Owner O)

> Now I have rented out a block of my guesthouse for the Charity Department at the Baitulmal [government sector]. I know I won't get profits from it compared to renting them out normally. But I'm doing this for the sake of my late father's last wish. It's for his charity too…we charge less for the people in need of place to stay, especially the elderly. Also, now I am also setting up business space around this guesthouse so local people nearby can start up their small businesses. It'll be an attraction for the locals to come by. (Owner K)

Janaji and Ibrahim (2019), as well as Lopes (2019), reported that most CBTEs were set up due to passion and only a few were based on entrepreneurial and financial motivations apart from their aspirations to promote local products, services, culture, and lifestyle. In their study, CBT owners who provide homestay services in Brunei felt empowered from the opportunities to operate their businesses by engaging local communities, while also promoting Bruneian culture including the origins and makings of local food and lifestyle. The CBTE owners in our study also reported on the success of continued initiatives fostering relationships, communication and cooperation with the surrounding community, as they continue to receive positive participation from the locals, either through partnerships and/or clients, that eventually generate profits and incomes to secure the sustainability of their CBT operations (Arbulu et al., 2021; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2021; Haywood, 2020).

Hierarchical and Bureaucratic Communicative Leadership and its Impact on CBT Empowerment

There is a complex relationship between communication and leadership involving external agencies and stakeholders. In the interviews, there are reports of issues surrounding hierarchical and bureaucratic communication and involvement between CBTE owners and authorities (government). This is also intertwined with the role of leadership across top-down channels of communication. The CBTE owners remarked on the significant roles of the *ketua kampung* (head of a village) and *penghulu* (head of subdistrict or a group of villages) and their influence and decision making over CBTEs.

In Brunei, the concept of the *ketua kampung* and *penghulu* is similar to that of community leaders in the general context of tourism (henceforth referred to as community leaders). As an important government agent, these community leaders are the "eyes, ears and mouths" and the middlemen for the country's bureaucratic

administration of the community. These community leaders also represent the government through the Tourism Development Department (TDD) as stakeholders in the community-level tourism industry.

Some CBTE owners remarked on the significance of their community leaders in supporting CBTEs, while others expressed their doubts as to whether their involvement can contribute the success of CBT ventures. A key issue is the transmission of knowledge and directive orders from the government through community leaders. For instance, Owners A and M commented on inadequate information, while Owner J mentioned a lack of cooperation from community leaders. Moreover, 14 out of 16 CBTE owners claimed that they have never seen a cooperative climate and were never part of the community discussions, signalling their frustration and feeling unempowered as small-scale entrepreneurs and as part of the community. In contrast, the other two owners, who were members of the Village Consultative Council, were able to voice their opinions and were kept updated with the CBT affairs in Brunei.

> Usually, only *ketua kampung*s and *penghulu*s are being called to listen to seminars or workshops [about CBT]. But usually, this information was not relay to us (community), or the CBT operators. We hope they [relevant stakeholder] would come to us and communicate better. (Owner M)

> Yes, I am involved as a member of our Village Consultative Council, also the association dealing with the culture, tourism, and hospitality sector in this village. Yes, they do listen to my opinions. I will join any meetings and discuss on what should be done for our village. If I received any guests, I would inform our community leader. That's how I manage my homestay. (Owner C)

> I am actually the secretary of our Village Consultative Council, so I have to be there with these community leaders around to discuss about the development of each village and any products that will be suitable to promote by each village. So, I have the chance to voice my opinions and discuss about arising matters. Being around the community leaders also help because they should be the ones who know more about CBT. (Owner F)

In Brunei, local community leaders are the agents of transmission for CBT owners, as they also support the community welfare and well-being (Pang, 2018) and transmit the knowledge and standardisation of CBT as part of Village Consultative Councils affairs (BruDirect, 2019). In this case, active involvement of community leaders and open communication between them and the CBTE owners are crucial to ensure the owners are being equipped with the current knowledge of CBT practices (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019; Chilli & Ngxongo, 2017) and necessary support to sustain their business (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Giampiccoli et al., 2015; Kayat et al., 2016). However, this is yet to be achieved at large using top-down communication.

Adli and Chin (2021) stated that "the lack of leadership [and] the lack of proper management system[s]" and licensing issues are unresolved problems in homestay operations in Brunei (p. 23). Similarly, the present study found that disengagement between authorities and CBT owners may have caused confusion amongst CBTE

owners as to how to register and obtain licenses as official CBT operators. Only three out of 16 CBT establishments are formally registered, while others reported either being registered under Business License 16-17 and supported by their respective District Offices or waiting for assessment or approval. Some refused to register their businesses with the TDD, as they were unaware of the benefits of being registered, or their businesses were not able to meet the ASEAN community-based tourism standards, or felt that the authorities did not understand their operations.

> We are aware of the registration process and CBT standards, and now we run our operations based on Business License 16-17 and approval from the District Office. We tried applying for CBT registration and license, but we couldn't meet their standards, these are too high for us. We started off just as residential scheme and only came about to do CBT-based homestays recently. We didn't initiate it as business. It was more natural for us to live here and offer homestay experience for people. Yet again, we can't meet the high CBT standards. (Owner F)

> For some of these CBT operations, we should know who to refer to. There is nothing set on the paper. There is no guideline. I haven't seen any guideline [specific for CBT operations in Brunei]. I've only seen guidelines for lodges and the ASEAN tourism. I told them I said the ASEAN guidelines are good, no doubt, but not everybody can achieve that guideline. (Owner A)

> Actually, we did apply [for registration]. The last time I checked, it was still in process, but I don't know what's the update with them, because it's so hard like for us to be fully certified. It's not the license. It's the Standard Operation Procedure. (Owner O)

> I don't know [about the CBT guidelines and policies]. We run this place by ourselves. Also, because we built this house not for the purpose of business, the idea only came after that, so probably it won't get certified to some extent. We do acknowledge about safety precautions and all for our customers. (Owner L)

The dissatisfaction with bureaucratic experiences (Adli & Chin, 2021, p. 22) may be due to the abrupt changes of management and jurisdiction from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT) in aligning interests to promote local products and services. The CBTE owners in this study stated that the confusion and frustration over the inconsistencies of management made them feel reluctant to go through bureaucratic processes. Some CBTE owners did not have a mutual understanding with the TDD on how CBT operations should be undertaken, as they did not receive guidelines for their CBTEs. Furthermore, most of these CBT operations also started out of passion, where their establishments were modified from old houses to become CBT operation sites. Some owners recalled this as contradictory to the standardised guidelines by the bureaucracy and appealed for authorities to revise the registration and licensing procedures for the local establishments. There is a clear misunderstanding between the government policies and the CBTE owners' aspirations and capabilities in running CBT operations.

Based on the interviews, the knowledge of being registered and owning a CBTE license with the MPRT is undervalued, therefore, these non-registered CBTEs

tend to run and develop their businesses independently with minimal support and guidance. Most respondents also reported to be cautious about extending promotional activities and accommodating more clients, despite receiving overwhelming responses from them. In contrast, Owners C, H and J are registered officially, they feel empowered to run their businesses without restrictions, and affirmed that they receive assistance such as free promotion and marketing and funding channelled by MPRT to their businesses. The situation derived from ineffective communication and leadership has since affected the empowerment and raised issues of inequality for non-registered owners. While such issues have been discussed as a priority at the national level (Salleh, 2017), fewer actions have been taken to improve these problems involving local CBT practices.

> Yes, my homestay is registered with the Tourism Development Department. I need to, I can't set up this homestay without license. That's how I get my clients too. Sometimes they come from acknowledgement by the Department. When we are registered, the Department may be able to track our businesses, so when they need accommodation for certain guests or clients, they will call me first. That's their Standard of Operation Procedure, their guidelines. So, it helps with the promotion of my homestay too. (Owner C)

> We are under 'One Village, One Product' a platform to promote authentic local products by village consultative councils overseen by Ministry of Home Affairs. So, we're presenting the village for Ministry of Home Affairs. While for our cultural products, we work together with Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism. So, with the diverse products that we have, it kind of supports us in terms of income in our lively hood. We also received a financial support for our jetty. It is funded by the Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism, they're going to start the construction soon. (Owner H)

As aforementioned, other studies have noted the importance of fostering consistent knowledge and principles of CBT among major stakeholders in tourism and hospitality sectors (Dodds et al., 2016; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2016; Mayaka et al., 2019). Inadequate information on CBT development and restricted access to relevant information may impede the prospects and sustainability of the CBT owners' businesses in Brunei. However, according to Grenna et al. (2006, p. 1) all local stakeholders including CBTE owners "must be able to access the information they need to understand their long-term interests, articulate their opinions, identify proposals, and network effectively with one another." CBT can achieve sustainability by having open and effective communication and better leadership management between authorities, community leaders and CBTE owners (Asker et al., 2010; Brownell, 2010; Farrelly, 2011, Petrić, 2017; Pusiran & Xiao, 2013).

This paper has revealed some communication inefficacies within leadership in CBT management, particularly involving the relationships and exchange of crucial information in both top-down and bottom-up approaches. These issues have contributed to the emergence of unequal distribution of opportunities among local CBTEs, prompting a call for policymaking and effective communication channels benefitting all stakeholders in Brunei. Such efforts can be realised by bolstering

mutual cooperation and partnership between stakeholders and strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building and achieve sustainable tourism (Aref & Ma'arof, 2009; Asker et al., 2010; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; UNWTO, 2021).

In response to our research questions on (1) why does communication play a pivotal role in securing the sustainability of the CBT industry?; (2) how is empowerment channelled through communication between CBT stakeholders?; and (3) how do effective communication and equality secure the empowerment of CBT in Brunei?, following our findings and discussion, effective communication flow from authorities to community leaders and further to the CBT operators can affect the sustainability of CBT operations. Based on responses from the local CBT owners, this can be detected clearly through the access of knowledge and opportunities in tourism passed down to CBT operators, and these can further enhance their existence in the CBT industry in Brunei. Active community leaders and participation of CBT operators with the surrounding communities have bolstered more opportunities in collaboration between the CBT operators and the communities, and further secure their sustainability in the small-scale tourism industry in Brunei. As a reflection on our research questions, Table 2 shows some highlighted findings on the importance of leadership style and effective communication between stakeholders in the success of CBT operations, particularly involving distribution of equality and empowerment among CBTEs in the tourism industry.

Formation, leadership and communication in CBTE operations	Main Findings
Internal leadership and communication	**1) The relationship between CBTE owner and subordinates:** a. Centralised leadership with high flexibility and less formality helps smoothen the delegation of work. b. Open communication and less formality and bureaucracy become effective channel. **2) The relationship between CBTE owner and the community:** a. Mutual partnership boosts CBT cooperation, benefits, and capacity. b. CBTEs flourish from contributing back to the community by creating jobs and charity.
External leadership and communication	**1) The relationship between CBTE owner and the community leader (the authority):** a. Effective top-down communication (from the authority) ensures transmission of knowledge and directives to CBT operators. b. Effective bottom-up communication (from CBT operators) ensures access of knowledge and resources from the authority.

Table 2. Summary of findings

This paper has shown that the interactional effects of leadership, communication and equality contributing to the empowerment of CBTEs can be assessed vertically (top-down approach between CBTE owners and subordinates; and bottom-up accessibility between CBTE owners and authorities) and horizontally (between CBT owners and surrounding local communities). The responses from the CBTE owners can be summarised using an interactional model, which justifies the importance of

communication and leadership to empowering CBT stakeholders in a bureaucratic environment as illustrated in Figure 2 earlier.

Our newly-formulated interactional model (Figure 2) suggests that the assessment of effective communication should involve a top-bottom approach of passing on information about CBT and directive orders from authorities through community leaders to the CBT operators (owners or managers), while also having mutual cooperation, agreement and partnership between the CBT operators and the surrounding communities. Meanwhile, the bottom-up communication between CBT operators and authorities should involve continuous and fair access to knowledge about CBT, relevant resources, and opportunities (such as funding, skills, investment, etc.) through community leaders. In this case, the interactional model suggests a continuous flow of open communication – both upward and downward – with fair treatment and access for the benefit of all stakeholders – in both internal (within CBT operations) and external communication (involving different stakeholders). This will contribute to the distribution of equality in terms of knowledge, resources, rights and practices, which can empower CBT owners, encourage community participation, and secure sustainability of the CBT industry. This is imperative, as securing "empowerment can support the management trustworthiness, which is an essential element of organisational commitment" (Kim et al., 2012, p. 10).

CONCLUSION

In the bureaucratic environment of tourism and hospitality activities in Brunei, the formation, management, equality, and empowerment of CBT ventures are affected via two means of communication: (1) horizontal/lateral communication between CBT operators and surrounding communities; and (2) top-down communication and bottom-up accessibility between authorities, community leaders, and CBTE owners, as discussed in the previous section and further illustrated in Figure 2. Whilst there are no reported issues on the former, the lack of interactivity and open communication in the latter have caused confusion and shown unequal distribution of directives, resources and opportunities affecting the sustainability of CBT growth in Brunei.

This paper has shown that ineffective bureaucracy can impede the success of CBT operations. The experiences reported by the CBTE owners call for a collaborative approach between stakeholders, particularly the government and community leaders, by analysing the importance of exchanging explicit directives and access to knowledge and resources. Furthermore, these responses inspired the formulation of a new Interactional Model of Leadership and Empowerment among CBT stakeholders. Due to its flexibility, we believe that this model can be further utilized in future investigations on other relevant factors contributing to the accessibility or interactional activities among stakeholders in CBT.

Focussing on the perspective of CBTE owners and operators, particularly in discussions surrounding bureaucratic experiences, has limited our study, but we believe our findings and discussion raise further potential by incorporating a larger sampling of the CBT population and the involvement of important stakeholders such as the government and the community leaders. This paper recognises that the knowledge of CBT, directives, access to resources and opportunities are mostly affected in local

bureaucratic experiences. It is thus suggested to have a larger sampling involving multiple stakeholders to generate further discussion in other aspects – for instance the cooperation with other NGOs and the larger community may have contributed to the survivability of small CBT operations during the pandemic. These recommendations for future studies are expected to raise more comprehensive discussion on the effects of bureaucracy and leadership that have impacted local and international CBT operations.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Festivals and the Theory of Inclusive Development in Malaysia: Perspectives from a Festival Organizer

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Festivals play a vital role in catalyzing inclusive development through their ability to increase social capital. They can enhance social ties through creating shared knowledge, building trust, and forming networks. In the Malaysian context, few studies have been done on how festivals promote inclusive development. Hence, this paper seeks to present a case study on Pangkor Island Festival (PIF), which is a Malaysian arts and culture festival, concerning the process, opportunities, and challenges of inclusive development from the perspectives of the festival organizer. In-depth interviews with the festival organizer and curator and field observations were conducted. Findings show that festivals promote inclusive development through a five-phase process, from establishing relationships with residents and exploring local assets to the sustainability of PIF and inclusive development. This study also suggests three-fold opportunities that include community cohesiveness, revitalization, and cultural value restoration as well as challenges of securing suitable stakeholders.

Keywords: Festivals; Inclusive Development; Malaysia; Participation Typology; Salad Bowl Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Festivals are defined as "the celebration of a specific theme to which the public is invited for a limited period of time" (Grappi & Montanari, 2011, p. 1129) and consist of various planned activities for the general public with predefined objectives, themes, and programs within a clearly defined period at a specific location (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Through festivals, social ties within a community are strengthened via shared knowledge, building of trust, and forming of networks and social cohesion (Bakas et al., 2019). In addition, festivals serve their host communities by preserving traditions and cultures that shape community identity (conservation), recontextualizing tradition and habits to suit contemporary times (reinvention), promoting local assets to both locals and visitors (manifestation), attracting tourists to the area (attraction), diversifying

local culture with new values and revolutionizing local businesses (transformation), and creating cohesion among community members (consolidation) (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Festivals can thus empower and revitalize communities and places (McHenry, 2011), making them a vital catalyst for inclusive development by increasing social capital (Bakas et al., 2019). Extensive studies have been done on festivals and social inclusiveness (Bakas et al., 2019; Finkel, 2010; Kwiatkowski et al., 2020; McHenry, 2011), but such aspects have yet to be explored more widely within the Malaysian context. To date, Malaysian festivals have been studied from the perspective of the visitors' experiences and consumption behavior (Ishak, 2010; Shuib et al., 2013; Ting et al., 2017), and governance (Ng & Rahman, 2021). Utilizing the Theory of Inclusive Development (Gupta et al., 2015), which empowers the marginalized community into place development, and drawing on the Salad Bowl theory (Berray, 2019; Othman et al., 2014), which explains cultural integration, this study seeks to: 1) explore the process of inclusive development among various stakeholders; 2) identify the opportunities for inclusive development; and 3) investigate the challenges towards inclusive development in the context of Pangkor Island Festival (PIF) in Malaysia.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Inclusive Development

Inclusive development is "development that includes marginalized people, sectors, and countries in social, political, and economic processes for increased human well-being, social, and environmental sustainability, and empowerment" (Gupta et al., 2015, p. 546). Its aim goes beyond individual economic performance and wealth, as in inclusive growth (Harberger, 1998), to social and ecological aspects of sustainable development (Gupta et al., 2015). In this context, inclusive development is related to the participatory approach found in the tourism development process (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Musavengane, 2019; Tosun, 1999, 2006) that takes into consideration the knowledge and aspirations of a community to empower local people in the decision-making process. Through empowerment, people gain self-esteem and confidence that they can, either individually or collectively, bring about changes in governance, society, economy, and individual wellbeing, creating new opportunities and benefits for the community (Gupta et al., 2015; Israel et al., 1994). A community's participation in the development process is thus seen as a bottom-up approach (Tosun, 1999; van den Bergh, 2022).

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND STUDY SETTING

The Malaysian Context from a Salad Bowl Perspective

Malaysia is, to a certain extent, a salad bowl (Othman et al., 2014) of several cultures and ethnicities, with its population consisting of 69.6% Bumiputera[1], 22.6% Chinese,

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1   Bumiputera includes Malays and indigenous people called *Orang Asli*.

6.8% Indians, and 1% others (Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020). As such, the salad bowl theory has been used to explain the integration of different cultures, stating that in the integration process the individuality and independence of each ethnic group are retained alongside dominant cultures; the theory also considers selective integration of ethnic groups in host societies (Berray, 2019). At the micro level, each ethnicity retains its unique cultural traditions, as is seen in the retainment of the mother tongue among various ethnic groups (e.g., the Chinese retaining the Chinese language as their mother tongue). At the macro level, Malaysia is a melting pot of various cultures that assimilates individualities into a common lifestyle (Advani & Reich, 2015). For instance, *yamcha* (to hang out over drinks)*, tapao* (to take away food)*,* and *syok* (superlatively good) are some Malaysian words derived from the mother tongues of various ethnicities. In consideration of the complexity of the Malaysian context based on the salad bowl and melting pot perspectives, this study focuses on a unique setting in Malaysia that constitutes this salad bowl, which is a small Chinese fishing village located in Pangkor Island. The study aims to illustrate how inclusive development within this community can be done through an arts and culture festival.

Regional Context – Pangkor Island

The regional context of this study is Pangkor Island in Malaysia. It is located in the Straits of Malacca, and is reached by traveling three hours by car from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, followed by a 30-minute ferry ride. The total area of the island is approximately 2,200 ha (Tanzizi, 2020) and is inhabited by 11,500 islanders (Abdullah, 2021), consisting mainly of Bumiputeras, followed by Chinese, Indians, and non-citizens[2], who form many small villages. Fishing is the major industry in Pangkor. Immigrants from the coastal provinces of China (e.g., Hainan), who were mostly fishermen, brought along traditional fishing techniques to Pangkor when they settled on the island in the late 19th century. The 1950s to 60s saw a major growth in Pangkor fisheries due to technological advancements, and these remain as a major pillar in the economic structure of Pangkor. Besides fisheries, Pangkor is also a tourist destination due to its scenic beaches and has been since it was a British colony in the early 20th century.

In recent decades, Pangkor has been experiencing out-migration of the younger generation, particularly in Chinese villages such as Sungai Pinang Kecil village. These villages were not developed into tourist destinations, relying mainly on fishing as the main economic activity. The community structure in these Chinese villages focuses strongly on clan associations, which, along with their respective buildings (i.e., centers, temples, and ancestral shrines), acted as a social structure that provided a diverse range of services to immigrants from their respective provinces of China and served as a social setting for people from the same hometown. The services provided include temporary accommodation, job placement, and even places for holding wake services and funerals. These associations remain as significant social institutions on the island today, albeit weaker when compared to that of the past.

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2   Non-citizens include foreign workers and immigrants.

Inhabitants in these villages have unique ties within the community where almost everyone knows each other. However, each family places greater emphasis on the household rather than the community. Thus, social cohesion is low. Residents hold a rather passive and reserved attitude towards changes for the common good of the village. The mindset of volunteering for the benefit of the community as a whole is weak. Hence, there is a need for a catalyst to bring the inhabitants together to address the challenges faced by the community. To this end, a successful Pangkorian businessman commissioned a seasoned art director, who has a strong background in community art festivals, to organize Pangkor Island Festival (PIF) as a means of promoting inclusive development.

Study Setting – Pangkor Island Festival (PIF)

PIF is the first island-based Chinese community arts and culture festival in Malaysia, and was first held in 2013. Since then, it was held annually for three years before being held biennially. The goal of PIF is to encourage and foster interactions among the residents themselves as well as between the residents and artists via arts and culture (Pangkor Island Festival, 2022), with the hope of setting an example for other places in Malaysia to emulate. PIF is held in Sungai Pinang Kecil village, with various activities including performances, exhibitions, forums, workshops, tours, bazaars, parades, film screenings, beach cleaning, etc., surrounding culture, arts, and the environment, targeting a Malaysian and international audience.

METHODOLOGY

This case study is part of an ongoing project by the authors called "The Place Making of Fishing Villages in Malaysia". Data was collected from interviews and site observations. Two separate, two-hour, in-depth interviews were conducted virtually in 2021 with two key interviewees who were the PIF organizer and curator, both of whom played vital roles in the PIF. For confidential reasons, both interviewees are anonymously tagged as Respondent 1 (R1) and Respondent 2 (R2) in the quotations that appear in the findings section. Content analysis was carried out independently by the two authors and findings were then cross-checked to ensure validity and consistency. Transcripts and findings were then sent to the respective participants for validation, and to raise research ethics concerns, if there were any. Furthermore, observations on the PIF were conducted by one of the authors in 2019 as a participant throughout the three-days festival. Additionally, site visitations, hand-note recordings and short stays were carried out since 2018 in various fishing villages to gain a better understanding of the local contexts (e.g., culture, lifestyle, beliefs, etc.). The entire data collection procedure was conducted using the common dialects of the local community, namely Hokkien, Mandarin, and Cantonese. The credibility of the researchers is ensured, as they are qualitative researchers who are experts in the field of social sciences, and are capable of communicating in the mentioned dialects.

FINDINGS

The preliminary findings are organized based on three main themes, highlighting the festival organizers' perspectives on the process of inclusive development, opportunities, and challenges.

Process of Inclusive Development

The following section explores the process of inclusive development within the community through PIF across the years. Based on the research findings, the process can be broken down into five phases, beginning from inception and ending with sustainability.

Phase 1: Establishing Relationships with Residents and Exploring Local Assets

Understanding the local power structure helps to facilitate relationship building with the locals (i.e., villagers, clan associations). The PIF committees visited each clan association to explain the idea of the festival and to solicit collaboration through emphasizing that they are much needed. Gift giving is relatively important in enhancing the relationship between the organizer and residents, particularly in cultural festivals. Frequent casual meetings with the clan associations are also another way to strengthen bonding. These relationship-building activities took place when R1 visited the village every month prior to PIF.

> Before you enter a place, you need to know the power structure. When we first entered Pangkor, there was no village head. Clan associations were the most powerful institutions. We had to visit each of them and tell them what we want to do and tell them what they could assist. I kept telling them that this is our (Pangkor's and my team's) festival and we do this together. During festivals like ghost festival, we send gifts and visit each other to show our support. (R1)

Besides establishing relationships with the residents, exploration of local assets (i.e., cultural assets such as history and myths) is also an important first step. Festivals can play the role of promoting rural assets, habits, and myths (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). For instance, an old well and archway with Jawi writing were found by the organizer during the festival planning, both of which were neglected by locals far before the festival was held. The organizer thus had the opportunity to re-present and promote the values and history of these artefacts through storytelling in the festival programme. These sites would then eventually receive favorable traction from residents and tourists, as explained by R1:

> We explored many historic sites, like the hundred years old well. At the beginning the locals didn't think this well has any value. Through PIF, we introduced stories behind the well; how it had benefited the immigrants who came from Hainan, and showed its relationship with the Hainanese homestay beside it and the archway that is written in Jawi. Many tourists will go to visit and then

the locals realized the value of preserving their historic sites because outsiders appreciate them. (R1)

Phase 2: Involving Residents in Art Creation and Performances

Phase 2 is the transitional phase where residents became co-creators of artworks. Art can serve as a means for social and civic participation, which contributes to community empowerment (McHenry, 2009). At the beginning of the PIF preparations, the locals behaved as bystanders. After a period of observation, they started to offer suggestions to the organizer and artists through hands-on demonstrations on how things could be done better based on their experiences. This empowered them to be involved in the creation, as well as to take pride in and have a sense of ownership of the artwork. For instance, there were a few, huge art pieces that were supposed to be destroyed after PIF, but were instead eventually kept in one of the homestays after much pleading from the residents. According to R1:

> You know... the residents, they went to beg the fish farm owner to keep the puff fish [installation artwork]. However, the size is too big to keep. Because they spent two months of hard work to create the piece... At the end, there was no choice but to destroy a few big artworks. The creators of these artwork were crying while destroying it. Finally, a homestay owner agreed to keep the puff fish, so the creators were so happy that they shouted to me "someone keeps my fish!"

The stage show was another way of involving villagers in PIF. According to the organizer, watching television dramas and singing karaoke every evening is part of the villagers' lifestyle, indicating a hidden desire to perform. Capitalizing on this, PIF provides a stage for them to show off their talents in stage shows. This direct involvement in stage performances increased the sense of ownership of the festival:

> It is a progress, the villagers started from seeing what you are doing, to knowing what you are doing, and thinking they can do better than you, then they get involved in doing it. At the end, they feel the resulted artwork is theirs. (R1)

Phase 3: Promoting Understanding Between Disparate Groups

PIF brought together artists from outside Pangkor via their artist-in-residence program, utilizing art as a means for facilitating understanding between disparate groups (McHenry, 2011). They brought in artists from West Malaysia, East Malaysia, and even other Asian countries. The interactions and exchanges of arts and cultural experiences bring about a sense of connection to other parts of the world. The differences brought forward through these disparate groups shed light on the uniqueness of local culture, and the appreciation from outsiders towards the local cultural heritage in turn helps cultivate appreciation of cultural heritage among locals. The interviewee (R1) mentioned that an indigenous group from Sarawak was invited to join the PIF and was thus brought in to Pangkor Island. R1 further elaborated that when two

distinct cultural groups meet, it helps in enhancing understanding between the two groups in terms of social, cultural, and spiritual aspects. Furthermore, through inter-actions with a different cultural group, residents feel connected to another part of the country that they may not have been familiar with prior to meeting this group:

> I invited five 75-year-old Kelabit (an indigenous tribe from the Sarawak high-lands in East Malaysia) artists to PIF. It was their first time to travel out of their village, and to the senior villagers in Pangkor, it was also their first time to see a performance by elongated earlobes tribe. It opened up both parties' minds. To some extent, this is cultural exchange. So, the residents don't feel they live on this island alone... they can get in touch with others. (R1)

Phase 4: Cultivating Awareness of Social Issues

PIF extended its focus from culture and heritage to social issues, further exemplify-ing inclusiveness of the locals' needs. Through art performances, local issues such as ocean waste and environmental hygiene were brought into the spotlight, with hopes of raising awareness and motivating change towards better living conditions:

> Through the artist's sharing session, the villagers were shocked to see that the ocean has three islands made up of rubbish. We had to keep telling them not to throw rubbish into the sea anymore. (R1)

Besides issues of trash laying around, PIF also sparked initiatives from the residents to create their own festival based on their cultural assets. "A group of residents started Mazu Festival in recent years. Since the Hainan association worships Mazu, Goddess of the ocean, they decided to come up with this festival. Fishermen support-ed them," said R2. This shows that, from the experiences gained surrounding PIF, residents have learned of the power that festivals hold. Such experiences, paired with the heightened awareness of their cultural assets due to PIF, have encouraged them to start their own festival celebrating their goddess.

Phase 5: Sustainability of PIF and Inclusive Development

PIF started locally before expanding to an international network in 2019, forming an alliance with Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Macao. The alliance aims to foster collabora-tion among its members in order to ensure the sustainability of PIF and develop its potentials (including social inclusion and sustainability of heritage and traditional skills):

> We formed an island alliance with Mokpo-si (Korea), Okinawa (Japan), Taiwan, and Macao. Through art and cultural exchange, we want to discuss, for exam-ple, how we can sustain our traditional wooden boat building technology. (R1)

> Young generations came back to start café business because of PIF. Now, they have evolved. Their business no longer depends on PIF... have developed into something I would say more 'local', which can sustain itself in Pangkor. We also

> have a 'Hello Pangkor' organization focusing on environmental preservation, run by this young generation. (R2)

As can be seen from the quotations above, the aspect of sustainability extends beyond the longevity of the festival itself. The organizer allied with other island-countries to elevate the content showcased and presented in the festival so as to further enhance cultural preservation. Social inclusion also further extends to the returning young villagers who moved back from big cities to start their businesses. These young villagers even started a non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on environmental preservation such as beach cleaning.

The Opportunities of Inclusive Development

This section explains the impacts of PIF to the community, which include three social inclusiveness potentials as observed by the festival organizer across the years.

Community Cohesiveness and Sense of Belonging

Festivals are able to foster community identity and togetherness from a social capital point of view (Finkel, 2010; Richards et al., 2013). This study further discusses social inclusiveness to develop community cohesiveness and a sense of belonging within the community. Despite the festival being initially initiated by an outsider (festival organizer), it eventually brought the locals to work together, such that they became active participants (e.g., performers) and not mere bystanders (as described in Phase 2).

According to R1, one of the social inclusiveness potentials of PIF is the cultivation of a sense of belonging. To illustrate this, taking the ocean waste issue mentioned in Phase 4 as an example, this issue, despite being prevalent, had always been ignored by the villagers, such that daily trash and plastic waste were not well managed via a proper sewage system, contributing to sea pollution. Moreover, throwing trash into the sea had also been a daily practice. Wanting to bring about awareness to the issue, an artist in PIF waded down into the sea to clean up the floating trash. According to R1, the sheer amount of trash gathered had shocked the residents, which caused them to be enlightened on the severity of this socio-environmental issue. Since then, the villagers have gradually improved their daily habits. More importantly, R2 emphasized that residents have started to feel that the island belongs to them and it is their responsibility to protect and preserve the place. For instance, the locals initiated a project called 'Hello Pangkor' to conserve the environment and protect sea turtles post-PIF. According to R1, the key for success in the PIFs is in getting the right people, which leads to the next point concerning attracting young villagers to move back to Pangkor Island.

Revitalization of the Island

Another impact of PIF is in its ability to attract young villagers to move back to the island. Since the festival first started in 2013, the island has gradually revived in terms

of its social structure and local economy, which addresses the community's concern that one of the reasons for young villagers leaving the island was due to the island's stagnant development. The snowball effects of this reverse brain drain are not only in the revitalization of social structure (rejuvenation of the aging community), but also the diversification of the local economy (from the singular fishing industry to other businesses). These returning young villagers bring in novel and innovative ideas from outside the island to the local community, such as homestays and bakery shops; some have even been involved in the festival, which has been helpful for tourism development, and subsequently in increasing the quality of life of the community, giving rise to a livelier society.

Restoration of Cultural Values

Social inclusiveness, fostered by PIF, also promotes restoration of socio-cultural values that the island's inhabitants hold. Through the festival, locals are made aware of the importance of the island's historical values and now gradually present them as tourist attractions. For instance, an old well, which had been long abandoned by the locals, is now being re-presented to tourists with stories of its past and how the place evolved:

> In the past few years, I have discovered some historical spots on the island, for examples an old well that was being abandoned by the locals because they found it not important at all! Once I made the locals understand the value of it, they voluntarily told me about the history of the spots or artefacts. And then I re-presented all the stories in the festival to let visitors understand the past of this place. (R1)

In short, the findings have demonstrated the importance of social inclusiveness on the development of a place. Without the collaboration of both parties (i.e., residents and organizers), the restoration work may not have been realized. Festivals thus play an important role in serving as platforms to showcase various cultures to the public.

The Challenges of Inclusive Development

The major challenge in conducting PIF at the initial stage was the lack of interest from the local community, which was due to two factors: First, a sense of belonging and cohesion within the community, which might be related to the aging society of the community. As mentioned, most young villagers have relocated to urban areas for career opportunities. Furthermore, at the start of the festival planning, there was an absence of a village council or officer that could be approached by the organizer. Second, the top-down participation approach – the event is initiated by the PIF organizer, who is perceived as an outsider by the community at the initial stage; locals were thus seen as mere bystanders. These factors could be largely associated to rural-urban interaction gaps, such as the movement of people, telecommunications, and commodities (Thompson, 2015). Cultural and communication differences

between Pangkor islanders and outsiders, such as between the local community members and the PIF organizer, may have resulted from many factors. These include the Malaysian context of a salad bowl and Pangkor's geography (its distance from the mainland) and history (the rise of the island as a popular tourist destination and its subsequent fall, where it was 'replaced' by other emerging destinations in the late 20th century (Tan, 2010). However, the community's input, decision-making, and provision of equal opportunities for participation are important components of inclusive development (Gupta et al., 2015). To ensure a community's active involvement in a festival, approaching the right stakeholders is important.

In this study, two critical stakeholders were found – the clan associations and the community of returning young villagers. Interestingly, instead of official authorities, Chinese clan associations are the right stakeholders to approach in encouraging the locals to participate in the festival. As mentioned earlier, associations serve as the symbol of unity between Chinese migrants and their descendants (Yan et al., 2020). Over time, this symbol remained crucial in most rural areas. In this island context, these trusted associations serve as the medium to facilitate acceptance of the festival organizer (the outsider) by the local community (the insider). Hence, associations are important for persuading the insiders to open their 'doors' to welcome the outsiders in organizing the festival together. As such, the PIF organizer was able to establish a good rapport with the locals after almost a decade:

> The successfulness of a community festival is mainly because of these local authorities [temples and clan associations]. It took me seven to eight years to approach the right authorities and then to be accepted by the community.

Besides the associations, the community of returning young villagers is also a vital stakeholder in the PIF. They catalyzed the inclusiveness developmental process, which gradually influenced the elderly in their families to get involved in the festival, forming a cohesiveness within the community. One significant example of such involvement can be seen in the 2019 PIF, where the elderly performed a short play (see Figure 1). Needless to say, the returning young villagers might have been more convincing than outsiders when it came to persuading the elderly to be a part of the festival.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the socially inclusive development of a Chinese fishing community in Malaysia from the perspective of a festival organizer. The findings show that through a 5-phase process, festivals help to strengthen community cohesiveness, revitalize economy, and restore cultural values while preserving the unique identities of the community, as described in the salad bowl perspective. Notably, the group of returning young villagers had played a vital role in the inclusiveness process; their innovative business ideas and incorporation of these ideas into the PIF have expanded the community's economic structure to include tourism-related income. This bottom-up participation has been shown to facilitate an inclusive development process, in spite of the top-down participation challenges that came up during the

Figure 1. Stage Performance by the Elderly Community in PIF 2019. (PIF organizer)

initial stages of the festival. To sustain inclusive development, participation of the local community should be spontaneous, with autonomy given to handle problems and implement solutions (Tosun, 1999). Without this level of participation, the sustainability of inclusive development could be a challenge. As a limitation, this study looked at inclusive development from only the perspective of the festival organizer; findings should therefore be treated as preliminary. PIF, as presented in this research workshop paper, is one of the case studies of *The Place Making of Fishing Villages in Malaysia* project. Further fieldwork with key stakeholders from other fishing villages will be conducted. Future studies are needed to investigate the local community's perspectives on the needs and benefits of inclusive development.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Social Networks and Organization of Thai Migrants in Europe: An Interview with Chongcharoen Sornkaew Grimsmann, President (2019-2022) of Thai Women Network in Europe

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The interview with Mrs. Chongcharoen Sornkaew Grimsmann, a long-term member and former president of Thai Women Network in Europe (TWNE), was originally conducted in English over email by Sirijit Sunanta and Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot in July 2022. It was supplemented by an online interview (via WebEx) in Thai by Sirijit Sunanta in November 2022. Mrs. Grimsmann served as the President of TWNE from 2019 to 2022. TWNE is well-established and one of the most active organizations of Thai migrant women with individual and organizational members in 16 European countries, the US, and Thailand. TWNE seeks to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organizations, both in Thailand and the destination countries, to improve the welfare of Thai migrant women. They organize annual general meetings to discuss topics relevant to Thai migrant women's lives in destination countries and publish an annual newsletter *Sarn Satree* (สารสตรี) to circulate information. Mrs. Grimsmann has extensive experience of providing community service as a social volunteer and working with international organizations, particularly in the area of women and children's welfare. She is now based in France and Thailand.

Keywords: Europe; Migrants' Social Network; Migrants' Social Organization; Thai Migrant Women; Transnational Social Organization

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INTRODUCTION

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *Could you tell us the history of TWNE?*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE is an association of Thai social volunteers for Thai women and people living in Europe. It's overall goal is to promote smooth integration of Thai societies abroad through partnership and collaboration with member organizations and individuals. The formation of TWNE took three and a half years

from late-2000 to mid-2004. The founding period comprises of four key events. First was the working group meeting in 2000 to assess the needs and problems of Thai women in Europe and roles of key volunteer groups. Second was the meeting in 2003 to set up *Thai Network for Women in Europe and Asia*, followed by the third meeting in the same year to refine the network objectives and to change its name to *Thai Women Network Abroad* (TWNA). Fourth was the meeting to sign a Joint Statement on Collaboration and Guidelines to assist women and children who are victims of trafficking and other problems in Europe with the Thai government agencies[1].

The network's name was then changed for the last time to Thai Women Network in Europe, to be in line with the Joint Statement. Over the past 20 years, TWNE has maintained a prominent position in the Thai social work scene in Europe thanks to strong, dedicated and charismatic leadership and also because of competent and active members and partners. On 12 November 2015, TWNE was recognized as an overseas Thai public benefit organization, according to Article 34 of the Royal Act of Thailand on the Promotion of Social Services B.E. 2546. TWNE celebrated its 20th anniversary in September 2021 in Caserta, Italy. Its annual magazine *Sarn Satree 2021: Parcourir-Enrichir-Agrandir* documents its 20 years of journey (in Thai language) and can be downloaded from the TWNE website. Much of the recount in this dialogue came from this magazine.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *Can you tell us about the driving forces of the network?*

GRIMSMANN: Dr. Pattaya Ruenkaew (Germany) was the network pioneer. Other founding members or driving forces include but are not limited to Ms. Pathummas Maanyan (Denmark), Ms. Panithane Taburel (France), Ms. Srismorn Meyer and Ms. Nonglak Trepp (Switzerland), Ms. Sermsee Boonsoot and Mr. Saha Sarapunt (the Netherlands), Ms. Payungsri Kulawong (then-Adam), and Ms. Prapairat Mix (Germany). What drove Dr. Pattaya to start forming the group was the inpouring of Thai women to Germany and other European countries in the early 2000s and the problems the women faced in their living and working conditions. Furthermore, there was a lack of information about social support for Thai women in destination countries.

SUNANTA: *What are the problems that Thai migrant women have faced? Have the problems changed over time?*

GRIMSMANN: The most important problem that Thai migrant women have faced, now as well as in the early days, is the lack of language skills. They do not have enough language skills to cope with the situation they are facing or to communicate with their partners. Language is a big challenge for most Thai migrant women, even for myself. It took me seven years to master the language. Another problem is the underestimation of the risks, the lack of preparedness, and the attitude that bad things will not happen to them. Some Thai women think that relatives in the destination country will help them out if something happens to them or believe that their partners will always be good. As for legal issues, sometimes Thai women arrive in the destination

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1   Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

country with a visa type that does not match their travel purposes. For example, some work while on a tourist visa or get married while on a visiting visa. Moreover, many Thais do not report to the Thai embassy when they arrive in the destination country. Thus, we do not have a good record of where Thai people are.

In terms of family relations, there have been cases of verbal and emotional violence either to the wives, husbands, or children. Sometimes, because of some forms of violence they have acted, Thai women lose custody over their children and they do not understand why. Next is the emotional difficulty. Migration is a very emotionally challenging process for Thai women and it induces depression. A friend of mine said that the emotional problem of Thai migrant women is like the elephant in the room. You think that you will overcome it but each step is very challenging – the weather, the unavailability of Thai food. When going out with the husband and you cannot communicate with anybody, it is like you are there but not heard or seen. You lose your sense of self and this leads to depression. Some do not even realize they are depressed. We train our volunteers to recognize and respond to depression and suicidal signs.

In addition, there are ad hoc problems, such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Thai migrant women, as some have lost their loved ones, both in Thailand and their destination countries.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *What are the purposes and objectives of TWNE? What does the network do to reach the objectives?*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE works to improve the social welfare and resolve social problems faced by Thai people, especially women and children living in Europe. We focus on providing information and sharing it among member associations and on cooperation and mutual aid between members and governmental and non-governmental organizations, both in Thailand and the destination countries. We want to ease the adjustment and improve the well-being of Thai migrants. We hope to show the host society that Thai migrants have potential. They do not just wait to receive social benefits but they also contribute to the society. We conduct field studies in member countries in Europe to better understand situations and needs at the country level and conduct workshops and training sessions to strengthen the capacity of TWNE members and partners. We expand our membership base and partner groups in more countries and mobilize funds from international organizations and Thai authorities. We also organize annual meetings and seminars to report progress, exchange experiences and lessons-learned, analyse problems faced by member organizations and their target groups, and identify ways to resolve these problems and move forward. In addition, we publicize our work in the annual newsletter *Sarn Satree* and through our social media, website, and other channels.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *Who are the members of TWNE: their general profile and main countries of residence?*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE members come from all walks of life. They are homemakers, retirees, social workers, tour operators, students, teachers, accountants, civil servants,

nurses and health workers, medical doctors, interpreters/translators, NGO workers, employees, business owners, entrepreneurs (particularly in restaurants and massage/spa sectors), to name a few. Over a half of the members are middle-aged and are well-established in their work or life. This explains why they could devote their time, efforts, and resources to the network. As of August 2022, TWNE has 87 individual members and 25 association members. All but five individual members are women. The five male members are from Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Thailand, and the Netherlands. Members are spread across 16 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK), plus Thailand and the United States. The largest individual membership is in Germany and the largest association membership is in Switzerland. Members empathize with fellow Thai women who face hardship in destination countries. TWNE refers cases across countries when necessary.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *As an international network and association with members from different European countries, how does the TWNE function?*

GRIMSMANN: While TWNE is a national association registered in France, its scope of work is indeed international. TWNE annual general meetings (AGMs) take place in different major cities in Europe each year, and country partners take turns in hosting the events. The annual general meeting strengthens membership and partnership and acts as the final decision-making body. Every three years, a team of Executive Committee is elected, comprising a President, two Vice-Presidents, a Secretary and a Treasurer. Two auditors are elected every two years from among the members. In each member country, there is a country representative (committee member or coordinator) who assists the Executive Committee in country-level affairs and in communicating with members on matters related to TWNE. Main tasks of the Executive Committee are partly managerial (membership, finance, publications, reporting) and partly case assistance, collaboration, and public relations. TWNE's main source of income is from membership fees (30€/person/year, 50€/organization/year) and occasionally from donations or projects. TWNE annual meetings are an important venue for members to meet and exchange ideas and experiences. The annual gathering broadens members' knowledge, reinforces their sense of belonging to the network and builds comradeship between members from different countries. Moreover, it is fun (*Sanuk*) to be with friends and meet new people, making the AGMs a special and *must-go* event. Each year, TWNE organizes a seminar on a selected theme that is of interest and relevant for members. The list of thematic seminars can be found in our Milestones.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *How does TWNE address existing social stereotypes about Thai migrant women in Europe?*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE addresses social stereotypes through dialogues, empowerment and knowledge sharing among its individual and association members. Much of TWNE's strengths lie in the work of members in each country who handle integration issues faced by Thai women through educational, language, social, cultural, and legal

interventions. One social stereotype is that Thai women marrying Westerners must support their families in Thailand at all costs, which puts a lot of pressure on migrant women. TWNE works with Thai government and academic partners in Thailand to prepare women before their departure and to strengthen social volunteers in areas of case counselling. However, there should be more efforts to empower women's natal families regarding economic and employment opportunities so that they do not need to depend solely or largely on their daughters in Europe. Another social stereotype is how Thai women regard one another in the labour market. Those who do hard labour or cleaning jobs are perceived as less accomplished than those who own businesses or hold high-income positions. This is a Thai social norm that does not sit well in the West, where all jobs are considered decent and dignified. Women in so-called low-ranking jobs may experience shame or a 'loss of face' if their Thai peers or families know what they are doing. However, this has improved over the years after more and more Thai people understand the employment structure in the West better.

SUNANTA: *What are the main obstacles/challenges for TWNE in achieving its goals? How does the organization overcome them?*

GRIMSMANN: During the 22-year period, many Thai personalities have helped manage and forward the network. The evolution was not an easy one. There were managerial disagreements and clashes in personalities as could be expected in most organizational and social settings. Thanks to strong leadership and a clear vision of key persons at that time, TWNE survived difficult periods by focusing on its mission. Another challenge is to respond to the needs of migrant women. Why? Firstly, because women in trouble often wait for too long before they ask for help, so problems become too complicated and time-consuming to resolve. Secondly, the number of Thai women moving overseas keeps increasing. Thirdly, the TWNE membership base has not grown much in the last 15 years; thus the number of competent volunteers remains just a handful. TWNE overcomes this challenge by engaging new volunteers through social media and other platforms, broadening its civil society partners, and arranging more case referrals to state and other organizations. Another challenge is that being volunteers demands a sacrifice of personal time and resources, often jeopardizing work-life-family balance. It is therefore difficult to find competent persons who could assume management responsibility of the association on a long-term basis.

SUNANTA: *How do you imagine the future of TWNE? What new developments are underway?*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE will go on for many more years because it still has much to offer to Thai women and people. Also, TWNE holds a symbolic meaning for its members in all countries who perceive the network as 'one family'. One of the new developments will be to help members and Thai women to overcome a drastic change in communication technology so that they are not left behind in the world that is increasingly digitized. The way in which volunteers had functioned in the past has completely changed. Encounters with those needing help are becoming less and less face-to-face but more and more online, thanks to the new normal created by the COVID-19

epidemic. In addition, in the second half of 2022, TWNE is implementing a project to develop a model of support for Thai widows and capacity building for social volunteers working on this issue. In 2023, TWNE will organize an annual seminar on diversity of work and occupations of Thai women in Europe.

SUNANTA: *What role do you think the Thai and European destination country's governments should play in supporting Thai migrant women and their organization(s)?*

GRIMSMANN: Governments in destination countries should prioritize a migrant-sensitive and friendly approach in their administrative procedures and system. I am talking about having instructions available in Thai language (or Khmer or Laotian, for that matter) so that new coming migrants can easily handle online or offline transactions, such as residence cards, visa extensions, health insurance, social security, pension payment, and driving licenses. This would be an important step toward migrant empowerment. As for Thai government agencies, more focus should be placed on enhancing everyday survival skills and handling paperwork for Thai people wanting to move abroad. It is time for the state to see migration and integration as a hard and hands-on science and offer practical training courses rather than orientation courses. Migrants must be able to take control of their lives and master their own paperwork because only with the right knowledge and practices they can integrate into the new society smoothly.

SUNANTA: *Please share with us some recent highlights of the network's activities.*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE's most recent Annual General Meeting was organized on the topic "Alone but not Lonely". It deals with Thai women who undergo the loss of European partners and face emotional, legal, and economic difficulties. Death of partner is the most challenging time for Thai women. It is a loss of a loved one who is also the key person of the family. Many Thai women struggle through this period, especially those who do not have legal marital contracts with their European partners. TWNE received funding from the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to carry out a project on this topic. We aim to train volunteers to provide support to Thai women in this situation.

SUNANTA: *Thank you very much for your insights. They are very helpful. We hope to collaborate with you again in the future.*

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DISCLOSURE

Book Review: Lapanun, P. (2019). Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village

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Transnational marriage between women from Thailand's rural Northeastern region (*Isan*) and the so-called *farang* (Western man) is a remarkable social phenomenon in contemporary Thailand, which Patcharin Lapanun explores in detail in her book. An original aspect of this book is the analysis of how transnational marriages transform the local Thai village into a "transnational village", and how they shape the lives of married women and their community.

Conducting her ethnographic fieldwork in a village in *Isan*, Lapanun spent four months there in 2008 and undertook follow-up fieldwork multiple times between 2012 and 2014. She did observations in public spaces where the couples are visible, as well as in their domestic spaces. She also conducted interviews with different actors: the Western husbands, the women married to *farang*, their parents and siblings, the villagers (including the local men) and representatives of the local government. Furthermore, Lapanun chose the city of Pattaya as the second main site for her ethnography to bring out the trajectory of transnational marriages. The Thai community in the Netherlands is her supplementary fieldwork.

In chapter one, the author points out that intimate relations between Thai women and Western men have started to emerge after the start of the Vietnam War. Around the mid-1960s, US military camps set up in the *Isan* region, which included many entertainment sites for soldiers for "Rest and Recreation" (R&R). The relationships between US soldiers and local women took place under the *mia chao* agreement (literally translated as 'rented wife'), which means these relationships happened outside of the marriage. The emergence of sex tourism in Thailand in the 1980s generated a second wave of intimate relationships between local women and Western men. Those relationships became an important trajectory in these women's lives, but also caused the stigma that links these marriages to sex work. In chapter four, Lapanun mentions a different perception of transnational marriages in contemporary Thai society. The government as well as the public media on a national level communicate about the negative dynamics

related to these relationships. They associate them with human trafficking and the diminishing importance of the local family institution as well as traditional practices. On the other hand, perspectives on a more local level consider these marriages as a social prestige and see in them an opportunity to boost the economic development of the village as well as increase financial contributions to the community.

In chapter three, the book analyzes the complex motivations and desires of Thai women and Western men to engage in a transnational marriage. Their motivations have multiple dimensions: economy, gender, sexuality, and class. The author high-lights that the motivations of these women depend on their "social location", a notion defined by Mahler and Pessar (2001). The women from a lower class feel a desire to escape poverty. Women who are single and educated belong to the middle or upper class; their motivations are more related to the gender limitation norm in their com-munity. The majority of the women married to *farang* had a relationship with local men in the past. According to local sexuality and gender norms, these women become "less desirable" for local men. They feel more accepted by *farang* men to be remarried. Furthermore, the common desire among the women in different social positions is to find a "responsible man" to be their husband and the father of their children. This is defined by the way that the man can fulfill the Thai gender ideology referring to the sexual division of labor within the household. The husband is expected to be the main provider to the family and to share monogamy ideas. Western men are recog-nized as "responsible men" because they can better fulfill these desired gender norms compared to local men. The book focuses on the motivation of Thai women. In regard to Western men, the author only underlines the gender dimension related to the feminist movement in Western societies, which enhances the equality of gender roles within the household. Western men who valorize the traditional gender roles tend to look at the Asian matrimonial market (including Thailand) to find a spouse.

Based on the "special money" concept of Zelizer (1989), Lapanun discusses in chapter five the stereotypes of transnational marriage regarding the feeling of love versus money. She analyzes the cultural and social signification of money in Thai society and their impact on transnational marriage. Interpreting the different mean-ings of money among Thai-Western couples can reveal certain tensions. For example, the Thai cultural practice of *sinsot* (bride price) aims at evaluating the financial capa-bilities of the groom and his ability as a husband to be the family's provider and to show gratitude to the bride's parents. Western men perceive this practice as purchas-ing a wife. The Thai notion of "*bunkhun*" (p. 122) explains the reason why the women should provide the financial support to their parents and their need to be supported by their Western husband. Moreover, most of the women married to *farang* are single mothers. They have children to be taken care of with less support from their Thai father. The Thai kinship cultural norm as "dutiful daughters" (p. 140) and single mother generate pressure on these women. The support of the Western partner has helped the Thai partner to fulfill these roles. Lapanun notes that Thai spouses define love by "care", "responsibility", and "reciprocal support" including financial support from their Western husband (p. 134).

The author analyzes the trajectory of transnational marriages and the women's strategies to get in relationships with Western men in chapter four. Many Thai rural women feel inspired by the success stories showing how the life of local women can

improve in case of a mixed marriage. The city of Pattaya is known as a sex tourism destination in Thailand. Lapanun describes it as the "space of opportunity and hope" (p. 96) because it is the main way for rural Thai women to find a Western husband. The women start by working in the sex industry and plan to develop a long-term relationship with their Western clients. Being a sex worker, they launch some strategies in order for men to desire them. They develop a worker-client relation by offering services to their Western clients that go beyond money and sex: for example, to accompany them as a local tourist guide, going shopping together and so forth. These activities are akin to dating during which women see if the Western man is the right person to commit to. Thai women also practice their spiritual beliefs by praying at local sacred places in order to find the 'right' Western husband. The author also highlights the "agency" of the ones "left behind" in the process of a transnational marriage (p. 149). The women's parents are likewise important actors who support and help their daughter to get in this relationship.

In chapter six, the book discusses the transformation of local practice by transnational marriage. In terms of economy, the community witnesses the emergence of businesses related to transnational marriage like internet shops, English and Western culture courses and so forth. Regarding the gender dimension, Lapanun reveals the "vulnerability" (p. 145) of the local men by explaining that transnational marriages would reduce their power over Thai women. In the kinship relation, parents have less decisional power regarding their daughter's marital choice and couple life. Once their life improves on an economic basis, the Thai spouses become the main provider for their parents. This gives them power over their natal family. Relating to social class dynamics, Lapanun refers to Bourdieu's concept of "class distinction" (1984) to analyze the way that transnational marriage transforms the social hierarchy in the village. She highlights the "emergent class" (p. 155) that consists of women married to Western men. Their marriage enables them to move up from a lower to middle class position in society. It also enables them to make financial and material contributions to their community and offers them social prestige. Nonetheless, they would still be facing discrimination based on their original social position in the lower class and as a sex worker.

Being Thai herself and familiar to the *Isan* region helped the author to conduct a rich ethnography. On the other side, the author has focused less on the perspectives of Western men. It might be interesting to incorporate these views in order to understand their interpretations of participating in the social transformation of their Thai partner's community. Note that the author mainly highlights successful transnational married couples that receive the social prestige within their community. It would also be interesting to know more about conjugal dynamics and to question how a successful marriage has been achieved. How is conjugal failure perceived in the local community?

Before closing this review, let us keep the book's main subject in mind, which is the impact of transnational marriages on local communities. I highly recommend this book to postgraduate students and researchers interested in transnational marriage, migration, gender, and Asian studies. The book has a clear structure and contributes to understanding the dynamics of transnational relationships on a micro scale known as the sending community.

Book Review: Lapanun, P. (2019). Love, Money and Obligation.

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Book Review: Yamahata, C., & Anderson, B. (2022). Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis

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▸ Einzenberger, R. (2022). Book review: Yamahata, C., & Anderson, B. (2022). Demystifying Myanmar's transition and political crisis. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 15*(2), 321-324.

The edited volume by Chosein Yamahata and Bobby Anderson stands in the tradition of edited volumes on contemporary issues in Myanmar emerging from academic conferences, such as the "Myanmar/Burma Update" series hosted by Australian National University (ANU) in the wake of Myanmar's transition since the early 2000s (Cheesman, 2012; Cheesman et al., 2010, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2000; Skidmore & Wilson, 2007, 2008; Wilson, 2006) and others (Egreteau & Robinne, 2015).[1] Similar to these volumes, the present book *Demystifying Myanmar's transition and political crisis* aims at introducing an interested (not necessarily purely academic) public to the current socioeconomic and political developments in Myanmar, covering a broad range of issues. The volume is based on the "Burma Review and Challenges International Forum" (BRACIF) – masterminded and organized by Chosein Yamahata, a professor of global and area studies at the Graduate School of Policy Studies, Aichi Gakuin University, Japan – held in 2009 and 2018.[2] What makes this volume particularly relevant and remarkable is the fact that it is one of the first of its kind as it was published shortly after the coup of 1 February 2021, triggering the so-called *spring revolution*. However, not all articles refer to the coup and some were obviously completed long before. The declared aim of the book is to "demystify the complexities of the derailed transition, the coup, and what both could inform about the future of Myanmar" (p. 18). It consists of 16 chapters organized in the two parts "transition and the periphery" and "from challenges to unity". Given the limited space available, this review cannot discuss each chapter in detail but will highlight some of those chapters that seem most relevant for the declared aim of the book mentioned above.

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1   For a complete list of the volumes emerging from the "Myanmar Update" Conference series, see https://myanmar.anu.edu.au/myanmar-update/2015-myanmarburma-update.

2   The book is also part of a series of books under the Academic Diplomacy Project (https://www.academicdiplomacyproject.org).

In the opening chapter, the editors – Yamahata and Anderson – themselves look at the recent transition in Myanmar, comparing how different "criteria of democratization" were "satisfied under different governments" in Burma/Myanmar (p. 5). According to Yamahata and Anderson, "people generally enjoyed more civic freedoms, political rights, and stable democratic institutions under the National League for Democracy (NLD) administration [from 2016-2021], although it still fell short of the parliamentary democracy of the 1950s" (p. 4). The recent coup turned "the Union from a budding democracy into a killing field" (p. 3). For the authors, it was the military's reasoning that a coup could be the "last chance" to stop the further consolidation of Myanmar's democratic transition. The military had also miscalculated that the NLD lost support. Another reason for the current crisis, identified by the authors, was a "messianic understanding of politics" in Myanmar, which accorded "unquestioning faith" in Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (p. 7).

The second chapter, by Michal Lubina, continues with the analysis of the role of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) in Myanmar's transition (see also, Lubina, 2021) and the election turnout in 2020, which brought a landslide win for the NLD to the dismay of the military. While, as Lubina argues, Suu Kyi tried at the beginning not to provoke the military in order to avoid a coup following the 2020 elections, she did not try anymore to soothe the fears of the military that "everything would remain the old way" (p. 39). As a result, the military "overreacted and staged another (fourth) coup", which, according to Lubina, throws Myanmar "now back to 1988 or at best around 2003, after the Depayin massacre" (p. 40). The following five chapters provide "perspectives from the periphery" by looking at developments and transformations in the regions and states outside Myanmar's political and economic centers. For instance, in chapter three Takeda and Yamahata discuss human security challenges in Myanmar. Based on the example of the Mon Women's Organization, they show how ethnic women's organizations (EWOs) are fulfilling an important role of civil society by promoting human security at the grassroots and, thereby, alleviating insecurity. In another case study, Khen Suan Kai (chapter four) looks at the delivery of basic education in Chin State, one of the most marginalized of the ethnic states. According to Khai, the reasons for the low quality of basic education in the state include insecurity, inadequate infrastructure and learning environment, insufficient and inadequately trained teachers as well as a lack of decision-making power by the state government. Coming back to the national scale, chapter eight by Lidauer provides a detailed account of the 2020 elections. He argues that there was no apparent tempering with the election results, despite some shortcomings. According to Lidauer, the statements by the Myanmar military that rejected the election process and used it as a pretext for the coup were implausible.

In the second part of the volume, the editors (together with Saw Chit Thet Thun) in chapter ten critically examine Myanmar's ill-fated peace process and ceasefire monitoring by highlighting its shortcomings with the aim to draw lessons for a better future. Their core criticism is that the most powerful non-state armed groups were excluded from the process, most pressing issues were avoided, and the civilian government lacked the authority to negotiate. They sternly conclude that "the 'Panglong 21' process, prior to its likely demise as a result of the coup, could not lead to any meaningful conflict nor political transformation in Myanmar" (p. 187). Taking a broader

international perspective, Jittipat Poonkam, in chapter 11, looks at Myanmar's current crisis in the international political context by taking an international relations perspective. According to the author, under the current crisis of international order and the "nascent bipolar system with Sino-US geopolitical competition", humanitarian intervention in Myanmar is impossible (p. 224). Furthermore, he claims that sanctions and economic pressure are unlikely to force the military into retreat, since they are not followed by all countries. In addition, his article criticizes the insufficient diplomatic approach by ASEAN.

A core contribution to this volume that takes the aim of 'demystifying' the recent developments in Burma/Myanmar seriously is chapter 12 by Patrick Meehan. It contextualizes Burma's/Myanmar's recent developments within larger development discourses, including development theory and practice. He shows how Burma/Myanmar became a "new frontier for development interventions" following the lifting of international sanctions, "which led to Myanmar becoming the worlds' third largest recipient of aid" within a few years (p. 233-234). Meehan argues that, due to the rush to engage in Myanmar, a large gap remained between critical development studies scholarship and development practice. Rather than reflecting on the disruptive nature of development, entrenched power structures and questions of distribution, a "market-plus" (p. 238) development narrative remained dominant in Burma/Myanmar, which served to depoliticize development. As a case in point, Meehan shows how *Myanmar's Agricultural Development Strategy*, which implicitly favors large-scale agribusiness and ignores the experiences of rural populations, negatively effects upland communities. He argues for a relational framework that "allows researchers to consider how forms of poverty and vulnerability can become embedded in the kinds of economic development promoted by governments and donors" (p. 250). The last chapter of the volume, by editor Yamahata, is focusing again on the coup of February 2021, which has "pushed Myanmar towards a 'point of no return'" (p. 232). He compares the coup to previous coups (including Thailand and Indonesia) and argues that, by the definition of the *Fragile State Index*, Myanmar has already become a failed state, with a declining economy, increasing poverty rates, lack of territorial control, and the military junta committing crimes against humanity. However, he makes clear that the Myanmar people did not 'fail' their state since they resist the junta with everything they have, most importantly through the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and armed resistance. Thus, the *spring revolution* marks a watershed moment in the country's history. Consequently, Yamahata demands democratic forces outside of Myanmar to support and "empower" the forces fighting for their country and democracy (p. 324). "Therefore", he adds, "recommendations from external players that neglect the people's grievances, inspirations, struggles and determinations to deal with the junta are 'out of question' to the people of Myanmar". They "simply refuse to have their freedoms and hopes stolen by the military once again" (p. 323).

Although thematically diverse and lacking a particular focus, this volume is a welcome and timely contribution to the field of Burma/Myanmar studies and also Southeast Asian area studies as it raises some important questions. Concerning its ambitious claim to "demystify Myanmar's transition and political crisis" made in the introduction, it certainly critically reflects some earlier misconceptions of Myanmar's transition and issues that were possibly overlooked or ignored by many outside

observers. (Although many of the issues were a topic among critical civil society actors in the country and continue to be.) This holds specifically true for Lubina's discussion of the role of ASSK and the editors' introduction to part two of the volume highlighting the limiting factors of the peace process, which from some quarters might have been assessed too positively. Also, Meehan's chapter might resonate well with former development workers and other people engaged in the development field. Particularly strong is Yamahata's analysis of the coup and spring revolution, which for him marks a breaking point in the country's history, and to some extent questions Lubina's assessment that the country has been thrown back to 1988. Overall, this edited volume is a valuable and diverse resource for social scientists and other interested scholars as well as students and a broader public that try to decipher the current developments in Myanmar and their potential future implications.

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Book Review: Fresnoza-Flot, A., & Liu-Farrer, G. (Eds.). (2022). Tangled Mobilities: Places, Affects, and Personhood Across Social Spheres in Asian Migration

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The edited volume *Tangled Mobilities* is a long-overdue call to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted lived experiences of migrants from, into, and within Asia. This continent has traditionally been a migrant-sending area and is now witnessing dynamic mobilities with diversified socio-economic profiles of people on the move, new migration regimes and pathways, as well as a "complex logic of migration" (Liu-Farrer & Yeoh, 2018, p. 9). Veering away from theories developed from Euro-American experiences, the editors propose the analytical framework of "tangled mobilities" to capture local specificities of Asian migration while building bridges with existing scholarship on (im)mobilities and migration.

This framework conceptualizes mobility as a dynamic, tangled social process in which different strands constantly intersect and interact. These strands are conceived by editors as "different elements (animate and inanimate), components (ideas, representations, practices, imaginaries, and affects), and forms of mobility (spatial, social, temporal, intimate, and temporal)" (p. 4). Each of these strands constitutes a tanglement itself and they become entwined with each other in an unfolding process that leads to multidimensional movement or stasis of individuals. Taking the study by Marilla (Chapter 3) for example, we observe how the mobility of home objects (inanimate elements) is related to the mobility of Belgian-Vietnamese couples (animate elements) over time and across space. Furthermore, Marilla demonstrates one the one hand how the multi-scalar spatial mobility (within the home, from private to public space, and crossing national borders) of objects reveals couples' home-making processes, migration trajectories, personal experiences, affects, and life aspirations (components); and on the other hand, how entwined geographic and social mobilities of

Belgian-Vietnamese couples are interconnected with the spatial mobility of objects (forms of mobility). Likewise, many other forms of mobility are discussed and analyzed in different ways in other chapters of the volume, for instance, economic mobility (Chapters 5 and 9), sexual or intimate mobility (Chapters 1 and 8), legal mobility (Chapters 2, 7, and 10), and temporal mobility (Chapters 4 and 6).

The tangled nature of mobilities constitutes the core of all chapters in the present volume, which illuminate collectively the intricate link between mobility and personhood, the value of an affective lens of analysis, the relational mobility and stasis, and interweaving social spheres that individuals inhabit and traverse. For instance, the study by Kudo (Chapter 6) explores the transnational family-making trajectories of Japanese-Pakistani couples and their children through a generational lens. First, she reveals how the geographic mobilities of these transnational families are shaped by Japanese state regulation of binational marriages along with religion-shaped and gendered social norms. As Kudo puts it, Japanese-Pakistani binational union is "tangled with law, economy, and religion" (p. 137), which has a subsequent impact on their personhood and social incorporation. Kudo explains in her chapter that many Japanese women became "paper Muslims" (p. 140) to fulfill the marital requirements imposed by state policy to register their marriage in Japan so that their Pakistani spouses could obtain a legal migratory status. Some of them even became practicing Muslims at later stages of their lives, through which they could earn the acceptance of their family-in-law. Second, Kudo illustrates how gender, religion, migratory status, and other intersecting power relations influence the way in which Japanese-Pakistani families arrange transnational caregiving and mobilities (education or career) for their next generation, such as relocating to Pakistan or other countries, becoming transnationally split families, and organizing short-term visits of an extended kin. Last, Kudo argues that the entanglement of different forms of mobility transforms the personhood of the children of binational couples. She describes that experiences of transnational home-making and marital breakup of parents trigger the dynamic self-making process of the next generation of Japanese-Pakistani couples and inform how they perceive, navigate, and negotiate their multiple aspirations in intimate and familial realms.

The case studies presented in this volume offer rich insights into the increasing complexity of Asian migration, "characterized by the entanglements of diverse migration paths, places, personhood, and affects" (p. 7). Empirically, this volume assembles a wide variety of case studies covering multiple subregions of Asia, addressing distinct migration flows from, into, or within Asia, and involving diverse actors from different socio-economic backgrounds (gender, social class, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age, generation, marital status, education, etc.). While these studies are conducted from either an anthropological perspective or a sociological viewpoint, their strength lies in detailed and vivid accounts of the lived experience of (im)mobile individuals and interdependent lives, as well as their aspirations and emotions over time and across space. Methodologically, this volume demonstrates the advantages of an ethnographic approach in researching migration and migrants' multifaceted lived experiences. Although the geographical focus of this volume is Asia, life stories of migrants presented by contributors and their theoretical reflections have relevance to global human movement phenomena and broader transnational migration studies.

Critically built on recent mobility scholarship and informed by Asian migration experiences, this volume advances a holistic and grounded conceptualization of mobilities and migration studies, revealing the interconnectedness, codependency, and interactivity of mobilities and mobile persons from a processual approach. This conceptualization is interdisciplinary in nature and draws on intersectionality, transnationalism, and other perspectives. The analytical framework of "tangled mobilities" is not reserved for Asian migration studies, as all phenomena of/related to (im)mobility presented in this book are not exclusive to the Asian continent. By contrast, it serves as a springboard for scholars from/in other geographical contexts to revisit recent mobility scholarship and turn their attention to the theoretical and conceptual contributions that Asian migration brought to the thriving global studies of migration and mobilities. Practically, this refreshing analytical framework finds resonances in what Castles (2007) proposed as "a critical but socially engaged sociology of migration" (p. 362). It overcomes methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and builds bridges between social science research and state policy, paying attention to the interplay between social structure and human agency across nation-state borders as well as multi-scalar (local, national, and international) social transformation resulting in an individual's movement or stasis. Moreover, the additional discussion of policy implications and COVID-19 influences at the end of this volume makes it a timely and practical book for both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences, especially for engaged citizens, professionals, and policymakers who are interested or involved in transnational migration.

In conclusion, *Tangled Mobilities* constitutes an original contribution both theoretically and empirically to the bourgeoning (im)mobilities scholarship (Schewel, 2020; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Moreover, empirical cases in this volume provide a compelling argument that future research employing the framework of "tangled mobilities" should engage the emotional and temporal dimensions of mobility (Cwerner, 2001; Groes & Fernandez, 2018). However, this volume leaves an unsolved problem for researchers to rethink precise data gathering techniques through which we could capture the complexities of mobilities while disentangling tangled mobilities (Wyss & Dahinden, 2022). The book will drive further scholarly discussions and pave the way for new research on yet understudied human mobilities.

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