

วิถีไทยจำเป็นหรือไม่? การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ ด้านการบูรณาการและคุณภาพชีวิต ของผู้ย้ายถิ่นระยะยาวชาวยุโรปในประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

ประเทศไทยเป็นประเทศยอดนิยมของผู้ย้ายถิ่นชาวตะวันตกมานานนับหลายทศวรรษ ชาวยุโรปมาประเทศไทยด้วยเหตุผลที่หลากหลาย และด้วยระยะเวลาการอยู่ที่ยาวนานแตกต่างกันไป บทความนี้ต้องการศึกษาการบูรณาการของชาวยุโรปที่มาพำนักระยะยาวในประเทศไทย (มากกว่า 3 เดือน) ประเด็นสำคัญในการศึกษา คือระดับการบูรณาการและผลที่มีต่อระดับคุณภาพชีวิตของชาวยุโรปย้ายถิ่นในประเทศไทย ผลการวิเคราะห์จากการสัมภาษณ์กับผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียชาวยุโรป 33 รายที่กำลังพำนักอยู่ในประเทศไทยด้วยวัตถุประสงค์ต่างๆ กันไปพบว่า การบูรณาการไม่ใช่สิ่งที่ผู้ย้ายถิ่นชาวตะวันตกที่ได้สัมภาษณ์ส่วนใหญ่ให้ความสำคัญ และการบูรณาการไม่ได้ส่งผลต่อคุณภาพชีวิตมากนัก บทความนี้ได้วิเคราะห์ประเด็นการบูรณาการใน 4 มิติ ได้แก่ การบูรณาการเชิงโครงสร้าง วัฒนธรรม สังคม และอารมณ์ ผลวิจัยพบว่าการบูรณาการในมิติโครงสร้างและสังคมส่งผลต่อระดับคุณภาพชีวิตของผู้ย้ายถิ่นชาวตะวันตกในประเทศไทยมากกว่าในเชิงวัฒนธรรมและอารมณ์ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งเมื่อต้องประสบกับเหตุการณ์วิกฤติ เช่น การเจ็บป่วย ปัญหาทางการเงิน ความขัดแย้งในครอบครัว การคอร์รัปชัน และอาชญากรรม

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‘Thai Way’ or ‘My Way’? A Qualitative Study of Integration and Well-being among Long-Term European Migrants in Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand has long been a popular destination for Western migrants for many decades. Europeans come to Thailand for a variety of reasons and differing length of stay. In this paper, we seek to explore how European long-stay migrants (i.e. more than three months) integrate with the Thai society, as well as how the level of integration affects their level of well-being. Results are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 European informants who are currently living in Thailand with different purposes. Our findings indicate that integration is not a strategy actively pursued by the majority of our European informants in Thailand and it does not adversely affect their daily living standards. From the four aspects of integration inspected, namely structural, cultural, social and emotional, we find that structural and social play a more important role in determining the level of well-being of our European informants living in Thailand, particularly under catastrophic circumstances such as illness, economic misfortune, family conflict, corruption and crime.

Keywords: Integration, Well-being, European migrants, Long-stay migrants, Thailand

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Introduction

When a person of a certain culture moves to a different culture, the person is often faced with a dilemma. Two main issues typically arise as a result of an encounter with the new culture: First, how much of one's original identity should one maintain; and second, how much should one embrace the new culture and participate in a society that is different from one's own? There are many possible scenarios: The newcomers may reject the new culture entirely while maintaining fully their original culture, adopt the new culture entirely while leaving behind their original cultural identity, reject the new culture while having little or no interest in maintaining their culture, or opt for a solution somewhere in between—a strategy that is often referred to as *integration*. With integration, the individual maintains one's original culture to some extent while still participating and interacting as an integral part of the bigger society (Sam and Berry, 2010).

Thailand has long been a dream vacation destination for many Westerners, and is now becoming ever more popular as a long-stay destination. The number of Western long-stay tourists in Thailand, such as expatriates, retirees, entrepreneurs, and those who are married to Thais, has been increasing steadily over the past few decades. Unlike tourists, long-stayers are more likely to be more involved in Thai society on a day-to-day basis and are therefore more likely to have to deal with cultural adaptations. Thai culture and traditions are generally quite different from what Westerners are accustomed to. Language, norms, values and beliefs are basic building blocks of a culture, and these aspects do Thai and Western cultures hardly overlap. Moreover, Thailand is a relatively homogeneous society, with little diversity in the language, religion, and ethnicity, making it more challenging for outsiders to integrate.

The aim of this paper is to understand the integration process of European migrants in Thailand, as well as its role in determining migrants' level of well-being. The paper focuses on European migrants who moved to Thailand for the purpose of marriage, post-retirement stay, or work. Research results are based on interviews with 33 Europeans, conducted in the EURA-NET international project, funded by the European Union's 7th Framework Programme for the period 2014–2017.

Literature review on integration

In his theoretical analysis of migrant's transnational activities and integration, Schunck (2011) cited Esser (2006) on the concept of integration. According to Esser, integration has different dimensions, which can be conceptualized into four core dimensions, namely cultural, structural, social, and emotional integration. It is further clarified that, “the cultural dimension refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, such as language, knowledge of norms, etc. Structural

integration relates to immigrants' positioning and the participation of migrants in core spheres of the receiving society—such as the labor market. Emotional integration refers to aspects of identity and belonging. While social integration refers to the interaction and contact with the autochthonous population, i.e., friendships, intermarriage, etc.” (Esser, 2006 cited in Schunck, 2011). The degree to which migrants integrate depends on numerous factors. At the individual level, integration depends on personal characteristics such as gender, age at migration, duration of residence, level of education, and the strength of cultural identity, among other factors. Martinovic et al (2009) studied social integration of immigrants in the Netherlands. They defined social integration as “the extent to which immigrants engage in social interaction with natives”. They found that immigrants who are well integrated in Dutch society are those who had stayed in the country for a long period of time. Immigrants who had moved to the host country at a younger age developed more contacts with locals than immigrants who had moved at an older age. Moreover, the level of education also affects social integration, as those who have higher education tend to be better integrated than those with lower level of education.

How much a newcomer integrates also depends on the environment of the host country. In a culture that is more discriminatory, it is more difficult for minorities to integrate. Studies have shown that there is a relationship between the role of discrimination and integration success (Berry, 2006; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Solheim, 2009). It is hypothesized that whether a migrant opts to integrate with the mainstream society depends on how likely s/he expects to be rejected from it. If acceptance is expected, then s/he would be more likely to integrate. On the flip side, if rejection is expected, s/he may be less likely to opt for the integration strategy. The acceptance level from the host country therefore plays an important role on the integration decisions and outcomes.

From an economic perspective, the extent to which a migrant integrates depends on the associated costs and benefits of the action. Lazear (1999) provided the first model to explain the incentives for integration. According to Lazear, the incentive for a minority group to assimilate is related to the expected gains from trade. If the minority group learns to speak the local language, an important form of cultural assimilation, they may be more likely to trade with the majority group. However, learning a new language can be costly in terms of money, time, and effort. Therefore, the migrant must weigh the expected benefits to be gained from integration against all the related costs.

The model proposed by Lazear provides an important fundamental understanding of a migrant's incentive to integrate. However, in reality, the benefits from integration extend far beyond those from economic gains. Previous studies suggested that integration leads to well-being and better health, both physical and mental, especially if a person is socially integrated into society

(see Brissette et al, 2000; Seeman, 1996). Seeman (1996) looked at social integration as closely related to the level of social ties and social networks which a person maintains. She described social networks as “the web of social relationships that we each maintain, including both intimate relationships with family and close friends and more formal relationships with other individuals and groups. It is through this web of social ties that individuals can be said to be socially ‘integrated’ into the larger society in which they live” (Seeman, 1996). Seeman found that those who are well integrated in society have better physical and mental health, and also a lower mortality risk.

Integration is also associated with fewer mental health symptoms (Koneru, Weisman de Mamani, Flynn, & Betancourt, 2007). Nap et al. (2014) examined the level of acculturation of different migrant groups in the Netherlands and found that higher cultural adaptation is linked to less need for care, lower symptom levels and a higher quality of life. Language is an important dimension that is often used as an indicator of cultural adaptation, and it is found to have a positive association with mental health (Nguyen, 2011).

The growing trend of migrants from a more affluent area relocating to less affluent ones leads to a growing literature on a different types of migration, particularly lifestyle and amenity migration. With regard to integration, studies have found that integration with local societies occurred much less frequently when the migrant in question is from a higher ‘prestige’ background (Matarrita-Cascante & Stocks, 2013; Beaverstock, 2002). For instance, in a study of British expatriates in Singapore by Beaverstock (2002), it was found that the social environments of these skilled international migrants rarely included locals; they mostly associated with their expatriate peers. Some studies point to postcolonial power differentials (Fechter & Walsh, 2010; Benson, 2013) or the unequal political and economic relationships between developing and developed countries (McLeod, 2004) that position Westerners in a more prestigious position. For migration cases such as these, it is often found that integration is more of an exception, rather than a norm.

Literature review on integration of Westerners in Thailand

Howard (2009) provides a leading study on the migration flows of Westerners to Thailand. Howard used the term ‘assimilation’ as he investigated interaction of Westerners and Thais. Howard found that some Westerners left Thailand due to their failure to assimilate into Thai society. The poor assimilation (or integration) stems from the lack of Thai acquaintances, and the tendency of Thai people to stick together rather than interact with foreigners. However, Howard also pointed out some positive cases of assimilation of Westerners in Thailand. Most of the respondents in Howard’s study (1,003 samples) suggested good assimilation and an interest to assimilate. Most respondents aspired to have a good knowledge of Thai culture, but the majority did not speak Thai.

Relatively fewer studies have looked into the integration status and well-being of Westerners in Thailand. Western migration to Thailand poses a different circumstance than the conventional migration case as it involves movement from a more affluent country to a lesser one. It is likely that Westerners' incentives to integrate and the benefits of integration may be different from the traditional migrants. Husa et al. (2014) explored an emerging field of research of international migration to Thailand and found that the majority of retired immigrants in Hua Hin and Cha-am had already had 'tremendous experience' with Thailand from earlier travels. This suggests that most international migrants know what they are getting into and generally know what to expect when settling in Thailand more permanently. The study also found that the local culture is what attracts Western immigrants to Thailand in the first place. Therefore culture can be considered as a pull factor attracting Western immigrants, unlike migrants of other origins where economic opportunities are typically the main draw.

Although there seems to be an appreciation of Thai culture, Vielhaber, Husa, Jöstl, Veress, & Wieser (2014) argued that Western immigrant retirees rarely sought structural assimilation. Moreover, the 'lack of willingness or inability to adapt to Thai culture' has no particular impact on their life, aside from some minor inconveniences. As stated in Vielhaber et al. "Genuine participation in Thai life and integration into Thai society, however, is only rarely successful and is probably very seldom if ever pursued deliberately and persistently" (p.183). As such, only very few of the Westerners saw themselves as marginalized, while the majority viewed their acceptance in Thai society as adequate. In other words, assimilation and integration are not a priority issue for most Western migrants in Thailand. Most see that their quality of life is good, and even better than what they had in their country of origin, even without integration. Almost half of retirees surveyed in the study socialized with fellow Westerners, while those who claimed to socialize with Thais were typically referring only to interaction with service providers (such as staff of restaurants, shops, etc.). Nearly 80 per cent in the survey said their lives in Thailand were fulfilling.

Many Western long-term stayers in Thailand are married to a local Thai woman. For this type of migrant, there are some similar patterns in integration as other types of Western migrants (Cohen, 2003; Koch-Schulte, 2008). Aside from the obvious age and cultural differences, Cohen (2003) found that Western husbands often find language being a main barrier in their relationship with their Thai spouse. It is also found that the Western husband tends to be ethnocentric in their views and expect their Thai wives to adopt Western customs and languages. In terms of socializing, many couples prefer to socialize in separate circles, i.e., Thai wife with Thai friends and Western husband with Western friends. Westerners are also more drawn to familiar surroundings, such as doing grocery shopping at a supermarket rather than at a local market (Koch-Schulte, 2008).

Methodology

This paper is based on the findings of a project entitled “Transnational Migration in Transition: Transformative Characteristics of Temporary Mobility of People” or the EURA–NET project, funded by The European Commission.

Informants in the EURA–NET study included both Thai migrants in Europe and European migrants in Thailand. Altogether, the research team conducted in–depth interviews with 74 key informants, including 41 Thai and 33 European respondents using the snowball sampling technique. For this paper, the analysis is drawn only from Europeans who have settled in Thailand. For the 33 Europeans, 17 were high–skilled contract workers, seven married migrants/entrepreneurs, six retirees and three irregular migrants¹. The geographical factor or the location of informants was taken into account. European high–skilled migrants lived mainly in Bangkok or its environs, whereas retirees and married migrants were concentrated in Thailand’s Northeastern provinces.

Table 1 Characteristics of Informants

Gender		Country of Origin	
Male	26	German	9
Female	7	French	6
Age		Dutch	5
20–29	5	British	4
30–39	9	Italian	3
40–49	4	Swiss	2
50–59	3	Danish	2
60 or older	7	Spanish	1
n/a	5	Slovak	1
Location		Type of migrants	
Bangkok	20	High skilled	17
Northeast	9	Married/entrepreneur	7
East and South	4	Retirees	6
		Irregular	3
Total informants			33

¹ There were a few cases where the informants fall under several categories of migrants. In which case, the authors determined their category by evaluating their main purpose of coming to Thailand based on the interview.

Findings

In this section, the issue of integration of Europeans in Thailand is explored. The discussion first focuses on the level of integration based on interviews with European informants. Next, the respondents' willingness to integrate is described. Finally, the role of integration in determining European migrants' level of well-being and quality of life is explored.

Integration of European migrants in Thailand

Based on the 33 key informant interviews, the nature of integration of Europeans in Thailand is based on the core dimensions of integration as proposed by Esser (2006). These core integration dimensions include cultural, structural, social and emotional.

Cultural integration

Language

Speaking the local language can be considered an important first step to cultural integration and is often used as a proxy of how well integrated a migrant is to a new cultural setting. The majority of the European informants in this study have little to very little knowledge of the Thai language (their knowledge is mainly limited to greetings, saying thank you, and a few other common phrases and words). Of the 33 informants, three said they could speak Thai fluently (enough to have a conversation with Thais). Of these three, two are high-skilled professionals, and one is a student.

Regardless of the length of stay, the majority of Europeans in this study have a very basic knowledge of the Thai language. Although not explicitly stated, the reason for lack of language fluency is the feeling that they do not need to know much Thai. The benefits of learning Thai are not transparent as they can get by in their daily lives with either English or body language. From this point of view, there are no real incentives to learn Thai.

Although the acquisition of the local language is generally considered a stepping stone to cultural integration, this does not seem to be the case with European migrants in Thailand. Although being able to speak the language does break down some barriers between people, cultural differences still remain. Thais, as observed by one European informant in this study, do not like to have deep discussions of issues, but rather prefer to have light-hearted fun, and this makes it difficult to develop a more profound relationship. One Italian journalist, whose Thai is at a self-rated level of intermediate, explained:

“I don’t hang out with Thai people, and it’s not just the language. There are some differences in the way people have fun and talk together. It’s difficult for foreigners to hang out with Thai people and enjoy it.”

(Italian, male, high skilled, Bangkok)

Once there are no perceived benefits in learning Thai, any costs (time, money and effort) that must be put in to learning a new language will seem too high. Many informants rationalize this by citing their advanced age as a barrier to learning a new language or that Thai is too different from their own language. These reasons are valid to a certain extent; however the real culprit is their perceived lack of benefit to learn the language, and not the cost or ability.

Not only do Europeans hardly have the will to learn Thai, many expect Thais to improve their English skills so that Thais can better communicate with them. Of all the intercultural couples interviewed in this study, the language spoken at home is almost exclusively the European husband’s native language, followed by English. None of the couples used Thai as the primary language within the household, despite living in Thailand. An English husband, for instance, would rationalize by saying that English is an important language that will open up many new opportunities for his wife and, therefore, it would be in her best interest to learn English. In the workplace setting, one Dutch respondent found it rude that his Thai colleagues would speak to one another in Thai despite his presence:

“I was in a meeting and they were speaking Thai and I sat there for 20 minutes. I say ok, so much for this company. In my culture it is different; if somebody doesn’t speak the language, it’s rude to switch [to the local language].”

(Dutch, male, high skilled, Bangkok)

Another informant suggested that Thais should not be shy to speak English and should not worry about losing face when speaking English. The informant thinks that it does not make any sense for Thais learn English at school but are then reluctant to speak English to foreigners. The informant admits to being frustrated at times when Thais refuse to speak English to him.

The case of Europeans in Thailand therefore presents a unique situation where there are no real incentives for Europeans to integrate by learning the language. Quite the contrary, Europeans (especially retirees and migrants married to Thais) sometimes expect the locals to be more accommodating to them by learning either English or their native language.

Lifestyle, values, and beliefs

According to this study, the European informants still maintain their European lifestyle, values, and beliefs in their daily life in Thailand. Taking food as an example, Europeans typically enjoy an occasional meal of Thai food, but the majority (particularly the older European migrants) still prefer Western food and would make the effort to cook it on a regular basis. An older English gentleman who now resides in Khon Kaen would eat the Thai food that his wife cooks, would have to make Western food such as pork steak, chips, baked beans, and pasta at least once a week. Another older Dutch migrant in Suphanburi makes monthly trips to Bangkok to get his bread and pizza dough, which he buys in bulk and stores in his freezer at home for later consumption.

This study also documents the practice of European migrants (particularly those in the working ages) to continue to visit church, as they had done in their homeland. Although most Europeans in this study are not opposed to Buddhism and would happily participate in activities and rituals at the temple, Buddhism has not had made any apparent impact on their original faith/belief.

In terms of other cultural differences, the European informants in this study had no trouble explaining how Thais are different from themselves. In their viewpoint, Thais are friendly, proud, lenient, not orderly, materialistic, indirect, and irresponsible. The point of interest here is not just how Europeans view Thais, but rather that they acknowledge Thais to be different from themselves.

Given the perceived difference between Thais and Europeans, how do Europeans adapt? Consistent with other aspects of cultural integration, Europeans tend to maintain their own cultural identity and do not integrate with the local Thai community. There is also a tendency for some Europeans to produce stereotypes and apply ‘otherness’ toward Thais, or ‘the Thai way.’ What is noticeable is that Europeans refer to the ‘Thai way’ of doing things with an underlying tone of either amusement or frustration. In a way, one may view this as patronizing the local way, as Europeans maintain a sense of cultural superiority and Eurocentric views towards Thais. If this is the case, it is not surprising that Europeans are disinclined to alter their way of doing things (i.e., integrating). Acknowledging and accepting the differences of Thais is the furthest that the European informants were willing to go in terms of cultural integration. Conforming to the Thai way of doing things was not something that Europeans strive for.

“It is not culture shock, it is just amazing. Sometimes it is funny and entertaining. I see this as entertainment. That is not how it works, but this is Thai style on how they do things. They think differently from us. I knew when I came here and sometimes it is so funny.”

(German, male, irregular, Bangkok)

However, one informant shared that it is sometimes necessary to adopt the Thai way in order to avoid conflict and make life easier. Nevertheless, he finds it frustrating having to do so:

“If you have a problem with the condo manager, you can’t say things aggressively (be straightforward). You have to ‘sawasdee krub’ and smile and learn the Thai way of dealing with problems. It can be very frustrating for foreigners.”

(Italian, male, high-skilled, Bangkok)

In sum, European migrants in Thailand still maintain their lifestyle, values and beliefs as much as they can, while adopting the ‘Thai way’ from time to time mostly for the sake of convenience.

Structural integration

Esser (2006 cited in Schunck, 2011) defined structural integration as “Structural integration related to immigrants’ positioning and the participation of migrants in core spheres of the receiving society—such as the labor market.” Structural integration includes participation in civil activities, tax and welfare systems (such as healthcare services). There are different degrees in which Europeans experience structural integration.

High-skilled migrants and expatriates (most of whom are employed by international organizations or companies in Thailand, or by Thai companies) can be said to have the highest degree of structural integration. They are well integrated in terms of participation in the labor market and receive health insurance coverage as provided by their employers. These expatriates usually hold legal work permits and are assisted by lawyers or the human resource department in their organizations when they need assistance regarding immigration issues. Some companies assign staff to assist their foreign employees when visiting the immigration office for visa or work permit extension, to help with translation and communication with immigration officers.

Some Europeans who are married to Thai spouses but do not have a pension or welfare benefits have to find work to support themselves and their family. Some start a business, such as a small restaurant or street food shop. However, those with their own business often do not have health insurance, placing them in a vulnerable financial position should they fall seriously ill or experience a severe accident. None of the respondents in this study had experienced major problems regarding financial or health status. However, Howard’s (2009) research presented the concept of Westerners as ‘marginals.’ According to this concept, Westerners who initially come to Thailand for travel, then take a modest local salary (working as part-time English teacher or freelance worker) in order to finance their stay in Thailand for an extended period of time, can become a vulnerable

group. These ‘marginals’ often face financial difficulties and, in extreme cases, they can run out of money and end up begging on the streets (p.195). The term ‘marginals’ challenges the stereotypical view of westerners in Thailand as wealthy and privileged. The wealth and privilege can decline due to economic misfortune, family conflict, illness, corruption, or crime, particularly if the foreigner does not have any safety net. Marginals often fail to be structurally integrated into the Thai labor market and healthcare services, and often lack welfare, civil rights and legal protections.

The nature of Thai immigration policy is highly restrictive toward permanent residence. Also, it is extremely difficult for a European to be naturalized as a Thai citizen. Immigration laws and regulations toward European migrants are based on the perception that they are temporary visitors or self-sufficient, and basic government welfare and social protections are reserved only for Thai citizens. Therefore, these perceptions toward long-term Western migrants by Thai institutions has an important impact on the structural integration of Europeans in Thailand.

Social integration

Social integration is a major aspect which can affect an immigrant’s level of well-being. When a person moves away from their family and friends to settle in a new country, it takes time and effort to adjust to a new environment. The degree to which people integrate into a new society is different; some people are more enthusiastic to integrate with the host country than other. Social support is vital for a person’s health and social integration can help migrants to live better lives. Social support can derive from family, friends, colleagues, national or occupational clubs and associations.

Married migrants or migrants who are living with a Thai partner, usually achieve social integration through the relationship with their Thai spouse/partner. Europeans rely on their Thai partners for social protection. However, it should be noted that many of the cross-cultural relationships in Thailand are based on an exchange motive. Europeans in some cases provide for the Thai partner financially in exchange for their companionship. Therefore, the relationship in which Europeans rely on for social support may not always have a solid foundation.

The authors found that retirees are less likely to integrate socially into Thai society. One indicator of this is the ability and enthusiasm to understand and learn the Thai language.

“I told you maybe the [Thai] language [is my weakness], but I don’t want to learn it. It would be nice if I could speak Thai, but I don’t try to speak it because it is too difficult. I think Thai people have to speak English. Next year [is the launch

of the] ASEAN [Economic Community] with the goal that everybody speaks English. [People in the] Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore already can speak English [better than Thais].”

(Dutch, male, married/entrepreneur, Northeast)

Several respondents perceived English as a universal [second] language and expected that more Thais should learn English in order to communicate with foreigners. This reflects a Eurocentric view that Thais should adapt themselves towards Europeans even though they are in Thailand. Many of married migrants communicate with other Thais through their wives, who translate for them. Some said they do not want to learn Thai because they are too old, but the inability to understand Thai is a major obstacle when they receive medical services. Some cited the language barrier as the main reason for miscommunication when visiting hospitals.

The authors found that most of the high-skilled migrants in this study are socially active and maintain strong social networks. However, the authors also found that only a few of these migrants are well-integrated into Thai society. Some report having Thai friends and going out with Thai people. However, many expats in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, find ways to engage in activities with other Europeans, such as joining sports clubs, associations for European nationals and churches. These transnational associations function as social support and basic orientation in the new society, providing advice for newcomers, organizing leisure-time events and religious services (Moya, 2005 cited in Faist et al., 2013). Some of these clubs also welcome Thai people (most of whom are well-educated and fluent in English). Therefore, transnational associations not only forge transnational communities of Europeans but also serve as a way to reach out to locals and facilitate integration in the host society (Faist et al., 2013).

Social networking is important for social and emotional support of migrants. Friends and family in Thailand are the main source of help when migrants experience difficulties while living in Thailand. Social networks also facilitate social integration and improve the well-being of migrants.

Emotional integration

This study suggests that Europeans find it difficult to feel like an integral part of Thai society. Language is a big barrier since it is difficult to develop a meaningful relationship without speaking the same language. But as mentioned, even if the language barrier can be overcome, there is still a strong “us” against “them” mentality from both sides; there is always a sense of being an outsider with Thais.

“No matter how well you can speak the language, no matter if you’re married and if you have Thai kids, you’ll always be a Farang.”

(Italian, male, high skilled, Bangkok)

“I cannot say that Thailand is my home 100 percent. Thai people look at you and see a foreigner. I can stay here 20 or 30 years. You cannot delete this one.”

(Swiss, male, married/entrepreneur, Northeast)

Many Europeans feel that Thais welcome them mainly for the money, and this causes some bitterness and resentment among migrants. Conversely, Europeans feel that Thais are interested only in their money, and a frequent source of dissatisfaction is when foreigners are charged a higher price for the same goods or services than Thais. To a European, the dual pricing system suggests that Thais view them as an opportunity to make money, or as one informant put it—a ‘walking ATM.’

For Europeans that are married to Thai women, it is also difficult to feel like a part of the family, with language again being the major barrier. The European and his Thai wife typically live away from the women’s family but pay regular visits. During those visits, the European spouse would be typically quite disengaged with the Thai family, as one English informant described:

“I kind of lie on the periphery because you know, we are not speaking. But I sit there and have a glass of beer. When we do the karaoke, they play some English songs and make me sing.”

(English, male, retiree, Northeast)

Although they do not feel a true sense of belonging in the Thai culture, they do not feel like a true part of their friends’ and family’s lives back home either, especially if they have been away for a long period of time. One informant who had been in Thailand for seven years described the feeling of some emotional distance from his own home country. Upon going back to Europe to visit, he feels more and more like a foreigner in his own country, observing his birth country through the eyes of a visitor. Since it becomes more and more difficult for European migrants to identify themselves with a particular society, the longer they migrate, the more likely they are to see themselves from a cosmopolitan perspective, as a citizen of the world rather than a particular locality.

Willingness to integrate

This study found that the main factors contributing to the willingness to integrate in Thai society are age, environment, and duration of stay.

Age

This study shows that younger migrants are more willing to integrate into Thai society². They show more enthusiasm in participating in activities with Thai people such as casual dinners, parties, and volunteer activities. One of the informants (27 years old) reported taking a Thai language course before coming to Thailand and is now doing a master's in Asian studies in Thailand. Another informant (26 years old), who could speak Thai fluently, usually joins in activities with Thais and communicates regularly with Thai people. For older migrants (50 years old or above), none expressed interest in taking a formal Thai language course and very few were interested in engaging in social activities with Thais. Most of the older European migrants have Thai wives and usually communicate with their family in their mother tongue and use very limited Thai language.

Environment

The authors found that those who live in a metropolitan area such as Bangkok had more opportunity to engage in social events with Thais and also gain better material and medical support when needed. A Danish man who is living in Khon Kaen said that the town he is living in lacked social events in which he can engage (e.g., jazz clubs and concerts). He also stated that his lifestyle was different from most of Thai people in the area and he barely engaged in social activities with them. He cited the lack of information about social and cultural events which hinder greater integration.

Duration of stay

In general, most European nationals are allowed to stay in Thailand up to 30 days without a visa. Tourist visas are issued to those who wish to stay longer, but not more than 90 days during one visit. Temporary migrants who seek employment in Thailand need to apply for a non-immigrant Visa B (business) and then apply for a work permit within 90 days of arrival. The work permit will allow them a maximum of one-year stay, renewable annually. Other longer-term migrants such as retirees and migrants married to a Thai are allowed a one-year renewable visa extension. Those migrants must prove that they have stable income or maintain a relatively large amount of money in a Thai bank account. As mentioned earlier, European migrants are perceived as temporary. This perception is reflected in Thai government immigration and naturalization policy. Europeans in Thailand also perceive themselves as temporary visitors, and often described themselves as a 'guest.' This temporariness reduces their motivation to fully integrate into Thai society.

² For age range of informants, see Table 1

Integration and well-being/quality of life

Generally, the European migrants in this study are satisfied with their level of well-being and quality of life in Thailand, especially those in urban areas such as Bangkok. The aspect of quality of life that Europeans in Thailand tend to mention most is the affordability of goods and services which are otherwise unaffordable in Europe. The higher-income Western migrants can afford a luxurious condominium with a swimming pool, a nice car, a chauffeur, and a maid. As such, the lower cost of living in Thailand is the main contributor to their comfortable lifestyle.

The level of integration, on the other hand, generally is less significant in the life satisfaction of the European migrant. Not being able to speak Thai, for instance, is just a minor inconvenience in their everyday life. The respondents seemed to be more stressed out by other factors in Thailand, such as the traffic, corruption, and general unruliness, but far less so from being viewed as an outsider. In fact, the key informants accepted the idea that they are and may forever will be an outsider in Thailand, and that was not a major issue of distress.

There are certainly exceptions where the lack of integration leads to a lower level of well-being and quality of life. However, this mostly occurs when a European faces a harmful event, such as getting scammed, being involved in an accident or crime, or needing serious medical care. First, the language barrier makes an already negative circumstance more difficult than it needs to be. In the case of medical care, for example, not being able to communicate with the health care provider could affect the quality of care they receive or, in extreme cases, could be a matter of life and death. Second, with the mentality of Europeans being ‘outsiders’, it may be possible that Thais would side with other Thais as a case of a cross-cultural dispute. This can be true even when dealing with authorities such as the police. For instance, if a European is involved in a car accident for which he was not at fault, there is a possibility that police will side with the Thais(s) involved. Finally, Thailand is a place where having connections matters. If Europeans only associate with Europeans, they would not have the right connections to make life easier. These connections could be anything from trying to find a repairman to fix the water pump at home to getting around red tape in the bureaucratic system.

Conclusion and discussion

Thailand has long been a popular destination for travelers around the world, as proven by the ever increasing number of immigrants of various types. In this paper, the authors focused on European migrants who have stayed in Thailand for an extended period of time (i.e., more than three months). Specifically, the authors were interested in immigrant integration with Thai society, and how it affects their level of well-being.

Despite a large body of research suggesting that integration is a key determinant in migrants' level of well-being in a typical migration scenario, this study suggests otherwise for European migrants to Thailand. Some of the key informants maintain some sense of superiority toward Thai culture, and integration is not a strategy that they actively pursue. Despite this, for the average European, the lack of willingness to integrate does not adversely affect their daily living standards. They are rarely discriminated against or marginalized as a result of adhering to their own cultural identity.

There are four core dimensions of integration, and there exist some variations in the level of importance of these for European migrants. This study finds that structural and social integration are more relevant for the European migrants than cultural and emotional integration. Both structural and social integration play an important role in ensuring that European migrants have basic rights and a strong social safety net. Expatriates typically are well integrated structurally while migrants married to Thais seem to be more socially integrated.

Some types of European migrants are therefore more vulnerable than others. Irregular and retired migrants are the least structurally integrated, particularly in having health coverage that would protect them from catastrophic illness or injury. European retirees are a group particularly associated with higher risks, since they are older and hence are more likely to fall ill, and often rely mainly on their pension income which is not always enough to finance their health costs.

Integration is a two-way process. The degree of willingness to integrate in a host society are influenced by migrants' attitude and perception about that society. On the other hand, host society's social, political, legal and economic structures also influence the willingness of migrants to integrate. Integration therefore can be said to be strategic for migrants, raising the questions: How and why do they decide to integrate? What will they get from integration?

Thailand, as a receiving country of European long-stay migrants, needs to take a proactive approach to look after its long-term migrant population. Policies should focus first and foremost on promoting structural integration, particularly in terms of health coverage as it is a basic human right. For instance, affordable health insurance should be made mandatory for all immigrants with a long-term stay visa extension.

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