

Ventures of Business and Love – The Migration of Thai Women to Austria

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Abstract

Thai people account for the second largest group from migrants from Southeast Asia in Austria and represent a highly gendered migrant group since 84% of them are female. This paper outlines four flows of Thai outbound migration and introduces the sociodemographic context of Thai migrants in Austria. The literature review draws on cultural concepts such as individualism and collectivism, concepts of social and transnational relations, the notion of paradoxical hypergamy and geographies of emotion and love. Based on semi-structured interviews with Thai marriage migrants, this research further explores the aspirations, experiences and transnational relations of Thai marriage migrants in Austria. Three cases of migrants were selected from different geographical migrant source and target regions, various migration channels and distinct experiences in order to show the migrant's diverse backgrounds and perspectives in a transnational context.

Keywords: Thai migrants in Austria, Thai migration to Austria, transnational marriages, marriage-related migration, migration and cross-cultural relationships

Introduction

It is remarkable to see that the vast majority—more than 80%—of Thai migrants in Austria are female, while more than 60% of them are married to Austrian men (*Bevölkerungsstand*). These statistics

reflect the increasingly important phenomenon of international marriage migration. This study deals with the case of Thai marriage migration and explores the aspirations and experiences of Thai marriage migrants living in Austria. Moreover, transnational relations and the roles of, as well as, the impact on their families in Thailand is explored.

In Asia, marriage is traditionally connected to family interests and it is expected that ‘good daughters’ take care of their parents or siblings (Lu and Yang). It is only recently that research on marital and migratory motivations in cross-border contexts has found its place on the research agenda (Lu and Yang; Constable, *Cross-Border Marriages*). Marriage-related migration refers to migration in order to marry, to be re-united with a spouse or other situations in which marriage is a significant factor in the migration decision (Charsley, “Transnational Marriage” 20). Previous research on Thai marriage migration has mainly focused on the relationship of Thai female migration to sex work/prostitution (Cohen, “Transnational Marriage”) or human trafficking (Skrobanek, et al.), or primarily deal with the economic impacts of these cross-cultural relationships. Existing studies have examined such impacts either in the migration target destinations abroad (Ruenkaew; Jongwilaiwan) or in the areas of origin in Thailand, mainly taking place in the northeastern part of the country (Adsakul). However, there is a lack of studies taking into account both areas of migration flows that can answer complex questions of motivation and influences in transnational contexts. Moreover, there is no in-depth study exploring Thai migration to Austria.

For Austrians, Thailand constitutes one of the most important long-distance travel destinations that has become increasingly popular for travellers, predominantly older male retirees (Husa et al.; Vielhaber et al.). When looking at the migration counter flow, i.e., the case of Thai outbound migration to Austria, however, it is interesting to see that the vast majority, more than 80%, of Thai migrants are women, while more than 60% of them are married to Austrian men (*Ergebnisse*). This gender ratio is mainly a result of Thai international marriage migration and clearly represents a strongly feminized migration pattern (Yamanaka and Piper). The topic of bi-national relationships between

Western men and Thai women not only features prominently in Thai public discourse, including newspapers, magazines and TV shows, but also has aroused increasing attention in Austria. For example, recently a “Thai mass wedding” was organized in front of Vienna’s Charles Church where 17 Thai-foreign couples were married. Yet, not much is known about Thai migrants in Austria since prevailing images about Thai migrant women are often related to prostitution and bride order stereotypes.

This study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of Thai female migration in Austria that has not yet been systematically studied by integrating historical, socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects. By doing so, this study draws on demographic data, empirical research and emerging literature that focuses on the agency of female marriage migrants, rather than reproducing dominant discourses on human trafficking and victimization (Constable, *Romance*; Charsley, *Transnational Marriage*; Sunanta and Angeles).

In the following, the development of Thai international outbound migration will be outlined, with a focus on the specific form of marriage migration that is prevalent in the case of Austria. After introducing the Thai migration pattern to Austria and the demographic profile of this population group, selected case studies of Thai migrants living in Austria will be presented and discussed. This article is part of the author’s ongoing PhD research project entitled “Ventures of business and love. Thai female migration to Austria”. The author has been carrying out fieldwork using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods among Thai migrants in Austria and their families left behind in Thailand.

1. Thai Outbound Migration: An Overview

In general, international outbound migration can be distinguished in officially organized forms of migration where involved national governments promote and export a labor force, and in various forms of independent migration that involve both regular and irregular migration, which may be facilitated through direct applications for employment by the migrant, through formal or informal brokers, or

through social networks, such as relatives or friends (Sciortino and Punpuing). The focus of this study lies on the development of Thai international marriage migration and the experiences of Thai migrants by introducing the case of Austria.

Thai outbound migration as a mass phenomenon features distinct waves concerning migration patterns, structures and migrant's motivations and can be roughly divided into four phases, with marriage migration in greater numbers just having taken place in the final stage since the 1990s.

The first flow of Thai outbound migration started in the 1950s and 1960s when an increasing number of Thais went to study or work abroad in the United States, Australia and Europe, and some stayed after graduation. In the late 1960s, a considerable number of the Thai middle class, including doctors, engineers and nurses, moved to the United States where they represent the largest group of Thais living abroad until the present day (Mix and Piper 53).

The second wave of Thai outward migration began in the early 1980s and was based on overseas contract employment and was characterized by an increasing feminization. In the context of the fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (active from 1982 to 1987), the Thai Government started the labor migration scheme in order to address rising unemployment. The government set the condition for labor recruitment through the government agency and license recruitment companies (Husa and Wohlschlägl). In the last 10 years, almost 1.5 million Thai workers have migrated mainly to East Asia, Middle East and Africa, Southeast Asia and, in smaller numbers, to countries in Europe and North America. In 2007, there were 161,917 low-educated and low-skilled contract Thai workers employed abroad while 85% of them were men (Sciortino and Punpuing). Male contract workers mainly work in the construction industry, manufacturing and agriculture, while female migrants mainly work in the household and commercial service sectors as nannies, housekeepers, service employees and sex workers (Yamanaka and Piper). In Southeast Asia, women have often been depicted as more autonomous as compared to the social and economic positions of women from neighboring regions in South and East Asia (Hayami). Thai women have shared

responsibilities with men and also participate actively in agriculture and trading (Osaki). However, as elsewhere, women in Thailand have been traditionally seen to be mainly involved in domestic spheres focusing on housework, child-bearing and parenting, which was segregated from the male-dominated sphere of capitalist production, politics, religious life and the wider society (King 197–198). However, the efforts of the Thai Government to export contract labor did not prevent Thais from migrating independently in order to search jobs on their own (Sciortino and Punpuing 29).

A third phase of Thai outbound migration can be referred to as student and highly skilled migration related to Thailand's economic boom since the 1980s when a stronger demand for a highly skill population emerged and scholarships for BA, MA and PhD studies have been offered (Chalamwong). Furthermore, higher education from abroad is associated with prestige in Thailand. Destinations in the United States and Europe, but also newer areas such New Zealand and Canada, as well as education hubs in Southeast and East Asia, such as Japan, Singapore and China, have emerged. In addition, there is a small percentage of highly skilled Thais abroad occupying scientific, management or technical positions. Another type is the wide range of migrant entrepreneurs ranging from managers of big businesses to owners of small restaurants and “take away” eateries.

Finally, the fourth flow became significant in the 1990s in the light of Thailand's positioning in the global intimate economy. Paralleling a constantly increasing influx of international tourists and expatriates, marriage related Thai outbound migration, especially to countries of Western Europe, North America, as well as Japan and Korea, has become significant. Thailand has become a destination and departure for bodily or sensual expectations and experiences shaping both migrations to and out of the country (Sunanta, “Thailand”). This paper looks at the migration counter flow in the context of Thai marriage migration and cross-cultural intimate relationships.

1. Conceptual Foundations

In order to understand marriage migration, it is necessary to eliminate separations between social, the cultural and the economic

dimensions (Butratana and Trupp, “Thai Female Migration”). Migration and cross-cultural relationships are related and intersect historical developments, personal motivations and emotions, influences of family members and socio-cultural norms. This section looks at the antecedents and developments of Thai cross-cultural relations and marriages by mapping “Thailand’s place in the world sexual geography, as the ‘site of desire’ for men from other countries” (Sunanta and Angeles 711), and outlining Thai perspectives.

1.1 Historical Dimensions

Historically, three periods have been identified as drivers of Thai-Western intimate relationships and the image creation of the female exotic other: Thailand’s relative openness towards the West, the American GI period during the Vietnam War and the interrelated rise of international tourism and sex work.

The start of cross-cultural relations of Thailand with Westerners dates back to the Ayutthaya period. Before the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1351-1767 AD), many visiting merchants of different nationalities came to the country. Thai-Western intimate relationships were not an issue at that time, but historical documents from the 17th century indicate male Western imaginations and observations of Siamese women described as “excessively lewd” (Bhumiprabhas). Such descriptions can be found in the published diary of the first Austrian “world traveler”, Christoph Karl Fernberger von Eggenberg, during his visits to Ayutthaya in the 1620s (Wernhart and Lukas). Later, however, in the early 18th century, Thai-Western-marriages were forbidden by the first Thai code of Law (Piayura). During the Rattanakosin period (since 1782), relations with the West became pronounced after the signing of the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in 1854. The kingdom was opened for more international diplomatic relations and trade in order to intensify modernization. One apparent change in Siamese society was that there were intermarriages between Thai and Westerners. The first cross-cultural marriage took place during the era of King Rama IV; during the era of King Rama V (1868-1910 AD), the Thai state promulgated an act on marriage for

foreigners (Mattariganond). The next important development in the context of exotic and erotic othering and cross-cultural marriages in Thailand occurred in the second half of the 20th century in the context of the Vietnam/American War.

The East-West conflict in Southeast Asia brought military troops and economic aid to Thailand, but also tens of thousands of American GIs on their “Rest and Recreation” (R&R) leave. Most military bases in Thailand, as well as their R&R zones, were “surrounded by a ‘pleasure belt’ of restaurants, bars, massage parlours, hotels, nightclubs and brothels” (Meyer 70). Thai women increasingly entered relationships with American military men, while quite a few of them “preferred to have their own mistress, ‘hired wife’ or ‘bungalow girl’” (Meyer 71). The term war brides marriages in this context refers to relationships that are considered “the result of one nation’s military or colonial presence in another” (Cottrell 153). However, only a small share of these relationships developed into marriage and subsequent migration to the United States. Furthermore, the period of American GI visitors in Thailand had an impact on tourism development and the image of Thailand. The GI period “added a new dimension to Thai tourism: tourist oriented prostitution” and, from the 1960s onward, Thailand has become a popular international tourist destination with the images of temples, brothels and beaches (Cohen, *Thai Tourism* 2). It has been stated that foreign tourism only played a minor role in the overall growth of Thai prostitution, but women engaged in tourist oriented sex services became highly visible in various famous Bangkok downtown areas (Askew). Sex work was never officially acknowledged by Thai authorities, but the government also did not undertake pivotal measures to abandon it (Cohen, “Transnational Marriage”). Even though Thai tourism in recent decades has enormously expanded and diversified by featuring various forms of leisure activities related to cultural, historical, natural, educational and MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) tourism, the branding image of sex tourism in the name of exoticism and eroticism remains strong (Nuttavuthisit).

One can probably identify a link between the establishment of a sex tourist industry and cross-border marriage. Mix and Piper argue

that many Thai women living in Germany were, at some point in their lives, involved in red light and entertainment businesses back home (54). However, women who wish to migrate may find themselves with limited options other than working in the red light industry. Cross-border migration in such contexts may be a channel “to escape from the stigma of sex work and achieve [...] personal goals” or an opportunity to gain long-term residency in a foreign country (Williams 28). Several authors in this context point out that not all Thai-foreign relationships are or become marriages in the conventional way, but are fluid, which means that the lines between romance, marriage, sex work and cohabitation are blurred (Cohen, *Thai Tourism*; Sunanta and Angeles). Zimmermann refers to “tourism” that opened doors to matchmaking and marriage agencies, as well as bride order service that increasingly operate online.

These developments outlined above contributed to an erotization and sexualization of Thai women leading bride-seekers or male tourists to develop certain preconceptions and imaginations about the opportunities for bi-national marriage or what a travel experience in the country will afford them.

1.2 Sociocultural and Economic Dimensions

In many cases, marriage and migration can be related to socioeconomic advancements of oneself and of one’s family. In this context, familial obligations, sociocultural norms and individual desires to experience social or economic upward mobility, as well as more personal freedom, becomes significant.

In Asia, marriage is traditionally connected to family interests and it is expected that “good daughters” take care of their parents or siblings (Lu and Yang). Cultural concepts, such as individualism and collectivism (Markus and Kitayama; Hofstede), refer to how people define themselves and their relationship with others. Individualism stresses self-direction and self-achievement, while collectivism stresses in-group loyalty and conformity. In migration contexts, it is argued that not individuals, but households or families, play the central role in migration decision making (Stark and Bloom)

which in turn views income-related migration out of the village as their duty. Parents thus may encourage migration of their daughters and expect economic remittances (Guest 18). Wilson argues that Thai women's material exchange with foreigners "derives from a traditional economy of intimacy" where social relations and identities involve patterns of exchange obligations (92-93). Forms of social exchange include reciprocity as a pattern of a mutual exchange of gratifications (Gouldner, Faist) and solidarity (Faist, Portes), which is based on a situational reaction of a class of people facing similar challenges grounded on a group identity. In the specific Thai context, the concept of *bun khun* refers to children's, especially a daughter's, obligation towards parents or other caretakers as a generalized form of reciprocity. When sons become young men they conventionally are ordained as monks for a short time, which brings prestige and future wellbeing to the parents. Daughters, however, pay back their filial obligation by taking care of their parents at home that increasingly involves material support in the form of cash money, TV sets, mobile phones or the construction of a house (Wilson 93).

Through international marriage migration, daughters may not be able to support their parents physically, but demonstrate feeling and care through transnational relations and remittances (McKay). Transnational migration points to the fact that social and economic relations can transcend geographical boundaries. Migrants influence and are influenced by their continuing relations with their home country and by cross border networks that enable them to practice social and economic activities within different fields (Basch, et al.; Vertovec). Transnational relations in the form of economic remittances are most obvious, but also transfers of presents (souvenirs, food, jewellery) and "social or political" exchanges in terms of traditions, ideas or values can be highly relevant. exchanges in terms of traditions, ideas or values can be highly relevant. exchanges in terms of traditions, ideas or values can be highly relevant.

Sunanta and Angeles observed that many formerly poor women from north-eastern Thailand have adopted new roles as foreign brides, family providers, landowners or entrepreneurs through transnational marriage. There are high expectations of family members and the

migrants themselves if they move abroad as marriage migrants. Research, in this context, has focused on the differences between developed and less developed countries and argue that “migrant marriages are predominantly strategic in nature and contracted more for the purpose of obtaining long-term settlement and permission to work than to establish and enduring, intimate partnership” (Williams 27). A popular concept in this context is the notion of hypergamy, defined as the [female] practice of marrying men of greater wealth and status. Constable, however, proposed the term “paradoxical” hypergamy suggesting that migrants move up economically, but experience lower social status in the receiving society (*Cross-Border Marriages* 11). Moreover, people may plan to marry up, but marriages can result in a worse economic or emotional situation.

Finally, it should be pointed out that it is difficult to separate a migrant’s desire to improve the economic status and well-being of oneself and for one’s own family from the feelings of love, loyalty and respect this elicits: “Love is so often a key factor in the desire and the decision to move to a place where one’s feelings, ambitions and expectations – emotional, sexual, political, economic, hedonistic etc. – can be lived more fully and freely” (Mai and King 296).

2. Thai Migration: The Case of Austria

While Europe did not represent an important destination area for labour migrants in the early waves of Thai outbound migration, the region has become an increasingly popular target for Thai marriage migrants in the last two decades. Thai migration to Europe is a rather recent phenomenon and has been comparably low in numbers (Mix and Piper 53), but represents a highly gendered migration flow (Ruenkaew; Suksomboon; Sims).

In Austria, the number of Thai migrants significantly increased in the last two decades when Thailand became one of Austria's most important long-distance tourism destinations. In 1971, there were only 40 registered Thai citizens in Austria and more than half of them lived in the capital city Vienna. *Table 1* shows the increase of Thai nationals in Austria from 1971-2012. Especially in the last decade, the number of Thai citizens in Austria has been increasing. In 2012, more than 50% of the Thai citizens lived in the provinces outside the capital city Vienna and no spatial concentrations could be identified. In terms of absolute numbers, Thai migrants in Austria represent a relatively small minority. Yet, a part of the Thai population is a highly visible minority in local settings, especially through the proliferation of immigrant businesses, such as Thai restaurants and food shops, that reflect the globalization of Thai cuisine and the rising quest for 'exoticed' products in Western countries (Sunanta, "The Globalisation"; Butratana and Trupp, "Thai Communities").

Table 1: *Thai Migration in Austria, Thai population by citizenship 1971-2012*

Thai Nationals/Citizens in Austria/Vienna from 1971-2012 by Province		
Due date	Austria	Vienna
12.05.1971	40	23
12.05.1981	178	97
15.05.1991	671	201
15.05.2001	1,901	623
01.01.2012	4,041	1,177

Source: *Volkszählungen (1971-2011)*; *Statistik des Bevölkerungsstandes 01.01.2012*. Statistik Austria.

Table 2: *Number of Southeast Asians in Vienna*

	South-East Asian Population		South-East Asian Citizens			Born Abroad but Austrian Citizenship
	total	percent	total	foreign born	born in Austria	total
South-East Asia	12,589	100	5,410	5,000	410	7,179
Brunei Darussalam	2	0.0	2	2	0	0
Indonesia	480	3.8	306	285	21	174
Cambodia	232	1.8	41	39	2	191
Laos PDR	56	0.4	9	9	0	47
Malaysia	160	1.3	117	109	8	43
Myanmar (Burma)	26	0.2	18	17	1	8
Timor-Leste	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Philippines	8,786	69.8	3,386	3,073	313	5,400
Singapore	97	0.8	62	60	2	35
Thailand	1,481	11.8	1,107	1,066	41	374
Vietnam	1,269	10.1	362	340	22	907

Source: Butratana, Kosita and Alexander Trupp. “Thai Communities in Vienna.” *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011.

Compared to other migrant groups from Southeast Asia, the Thai population represents, after the Philippines, the second largest group (see *Table 2*). The strong presence of migrants from the Philippines is related to state organized labour migration into the nursing sector since the 1960s, while later on family reunification and marriage migration became relevant as well. Feminized forms of Southeast Asian migration to Austria can also be identified among the Filipino/a and Vietnamese population, but the gender ratio of Thai migrants is exceptional.

The vast majority of the Thai population in Austria is female as the gender ratio of 100: 416 demonstrates. In other words, 84% of Thai migrants living in Vienna are female (see *Figure 1*). The main reason for this structure lies in the marriage-motivated migration of Thai females. Using the weighted data of the Austrian labour force survey 2010, Statistik Austria calculated approximately 2,500 bi-national couples consisting of a Thai [-born] wife and an Austrian [-born]

husband (*Ergebnisse*). This means that more than 60 per cent of Thai women in Austria are married to Austrian men. The general proportion of bi-national marriages between Austrian and foreign Nationals accounts for 23.8 percent (Guličová 4). However, since Austria has introduced more and more obstacles for bi-national partnerships (increased required net-income and language qualifications prior to arrival in Austria, among others), the number of marriages between Austrians and third-country nationals has decreased (Butratana and Trupp, “Thai Communities”). Even though Austria has a long history of immigration, the country does not consider itself to be an immigration country and the legal framework for Non-EU-immigrants is among the most restrictive within the European Union (Guličová).

The demographic structure of Thai migrants in Austria shows that female age groups between 30 and 49 are prevailing (see *Figure 2*). This reflects two processes. First, a cumulative-temporal aspect of migration (e.g., women who migrated to Austria ten years ago now represent an older age group) and second, many Thai women migrate to Austria during their middle or higher age. Empirical results from this research indicate that numerous Thai marriage migrants already went through previous marriages and divorces before moving.

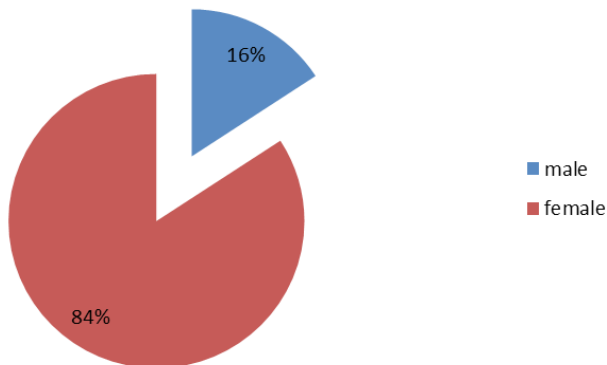


Fig. 1. *Gender Ratio of Thai Migrants in Austria in % from: Bevolkerungsstand 1.1.2010. Statistik Austria, 2010. Isis Database.*

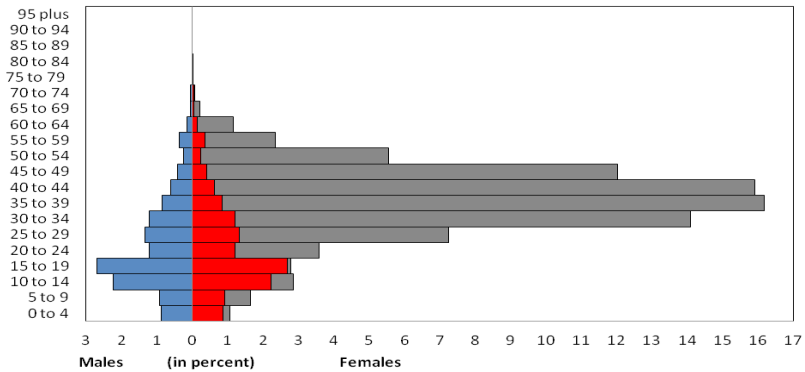


Fig. 2. Age and Gender Structures of Thai Migrants in Austria 2012 from : *STATcube Statistische Datenbank*. Statistik Austria, 2013.

It has to be mentioned that migrants in Austria are self-evidently not entirely constituted by marriage migrants. Additionally, other types of migrants exist, including (mainly independent) labor migration (workers), ethnic entrepreneurs (owners of restaurants or massage places), students and various kinds of officials (UN, Embassy, etc.). According to the Royal Thai Embassy in Austria, approximately 60-70 Thai students, including visiting students and guest researchers, are enrolled at different university programs in the capital city Vienna.¹ The most popular and obvious manifestation of Thailand businesses can be found in immigrant businesses, especially in restaurants, food shops and traditional massage parlours. The Office of Commercial Affairs of the Royal Thai Embassy in Vienna has registered 35 Thai restaurants in Austria, of which 20 are located in Vienna (Butratana and Trupp, “Thai Communities”). We also have to note that many marriage migrants work in the service sector or as small scale entrepreneurs and can thus also be referred to as independent labour migrants.

3. Thai Life in Austria – Three Case Portraits

After outlining the general development of Thai outbound migration and the demographic structure of the Thai population in

Austria, this section introduces three migrant profiles of Thai women living in Austria. Three stories of migrants were selected from different geographical migrant source and target regions, various migration channels and distinct experiences in order to show the migrant's diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In terms of demographic structure, these three profiles represent the dominating mid and higher age classes.¹

Portrait 1: Bee

Bee is a 42 year old woman living permanently in Vienna. She grew up in northern Thailand where she graduated from a vocational school and subsequently started to work in a fabric factory earning 9,000 baht per month.² In 2002, she entered a relationship with a Thai boxer whom she termed as a party person, drunkard and gambler. They have one son together who is now eleven years and lives in Thailand. As her Thai husband did not take care of the family and sometimes also hurt her physically, she decided to separate and move back to her hometown. Thus, Bee had a job and marital and familial life in Thailand before she considered entering a bi-national marriage.

In the 2000s, her cousin, "Da", got to know an Austrian man whom she eventually married and accompanied to live in Vienna. When Da got to know about Bee's situation after the divorce she offered to search for a potential new husband in Austria. Da found an older (78 years) single man, a good friend of her husband and sent a photo and some basic information about him to her cousin in Thailand. The relationship and subsequent marriage between Bee and her Austrian husband was facilitated transnationally through a relative of hers who already lived as a marriage migrant in Austria.

After the separation from her first husband, Bee faced a difficult living situation as a single mother and was strongly willing to change her situation by any means. She said she was ready to *pai tai aow darb na* [to cross the Rubicon]. So Bee accepted the invitation of this Austrian man and visited Austria for the first time in 2010 with a Schengen tourist visa. During her stay in Austria, she partly lived with him in his house and they decided to marry. Her new husband had been divorced for 10 years, had four children, had previously worked

in a company and received approximately 1,500 euros retirement pension each month. Sex did not play a role in their relationship and was considered as dispensable. Bee appreciated having a husband who could take care of her and her family and who treated her with respect. For these reasons, she was also happy to take care of him. Being aware of the age gap, she was worried about the gossip from the Thai community in Vienna and also from Austrian people who looked down at her or judged her to be just interested in the old man's money. The first years Bee got accepted by his Austrian children as they could clearly see how Bee was taking good care of their father. However, in 2013 her husband passed away and conflicts with his children arose leading her to leave the house. During that time Da's Austrian husband also passed away and so Bee and Da now share a place in Vienna. Bee receives a widow's pension of 900 euros per month and has tried to save money to support her son and family in Thailand ever since. Last year she transferred approximately 3,000 euros, mainly to support a good education for her son. She calls back to Thailand every second day by phone, mainly to her mother and her son. Bee plans to stay in Austria and wants to improve her living situation. She plans to make a driving license, improve her German language skills, get her own job and bring her son to Austria in the near future. Marrying again is no current future plan.

Portrait 2: Nong

Nong is a Thai woman in her mid-50s from central Thailand now living in the province of Upper Austria where she is married to an Austrian husband. Her husband is 69 years old and receives approximately 3,000 euros net income per month.

In Thailand, Nong completed four years of education in primary school. Before moving abroad for the first time, she worked as housekeeper at a Thai bank earning 4,000 baht or around 95 euros per month, and she was married to a Thai man. From her first marriage she has one daughter, who now lives with her in Upper Austria. Her first trip abroad brought her to Germany where she visited a Thai relative on the basis of a tourist visa for two months. During that time, she got in contact with a Thai restaurant owner who supported her to come

back to Germany and find a husband for a marriage visa. After her husband died, Nong went back to Thailand and worked again in her old job. Through another Thai friend, she was personally introduced to an Austrian man whom she married in the early 1990s. Nong inherited a big amount of money from her previous relationship. She used this money to run her own business, a Thai restaurant that has become well known in the region by both Thai and Austrian customers. Every week she goes to the Thai shop in order to buy food ingredients in the provincial capital city Linz, which is approximately 40 km away from her home. Buddhist practice is important for her, but the closest Thai temple is located in the provincial capital city. In order to carry out religious practice, she opened a meditation centre in her home village in Austria, which is also open for interested public. In the village there are two other Thai marriage migrants, but her best friend, who also comes from Thailand, lives in Vienna and often comes to visit her and helps her with the business.

Nong did not learn any foreign languages in the context of her formal education. Nevertheless, she learnt to communicate in German, but she has not passed the official German exam yet. Moreover, she made a certificate in Thai cooking arranged by the Office of Commercial Affairs of the Royal Thai Embassy. Together with her daughter Nong, she visits her family in Thailand every year for a couple of weeks. Furthermore, she calls her left-behind relatives almost every day. Before her parents died, Nong transferred several thousand baht each month to her family. Until now she financially supports a temple in Thailand when being asked to donate money for ceremonies or renovation. In the future she plans to return to Thailand.

Portrait 3: Noo

Noo is a 49 year old Thai woman from northeast Thailand who moved to one of Austria's alpine mountain villages in Tyrol in order to live with her Austrian husband in 1991. Her husband is five years older and works as a cashier. After 13 years living in Austria, Noo changed her citizenship to become Austrian. Noo has eleven brothers and sisters, but three of them already passed away. Her oldest sister moved with her Thai husband as independent labour migrants to the United States. Two of her brothers moved to Bangkok and

another province in the northeast in order to make a living. Two of Noo's younger sisters currently live as marriage migrants in Austria and Germany, relationships that have partly been facilitated by Noo. Thus, both domestic and international migration is common within her family and can be seen as a household and family strategy aiming at securing and diversifying income. Noo's parents still live with her elder and younger sister in her hometown in Thailand.

In Thailand, Noo graduated from grade four. She could not continue her education in Thailand because she had to work and support her family. She described her father as a gambler and drunkard who left the family responsibility to his wife and the older children. Among other jobs, Noo worked at a clinic in a north-eastern city in Thailand for three years where she met her first boyfriend with whom she has one son. She decided to quit her job and run her own business by selling drinks at the bus station as a mobile vendor. This was a very hard job because she had to run after the bus and jump in while the bus was still moving as the stops at the public bus stations are too short for selling her drinks. Yet she initially continued this work in order to support her family. As her Thai boyfriend did not assume the responsibility to take care of her and the family, she tried to get a better job when her child was four years old. She moved to Bangkok and became a sales person at a cloth shop at Bobae wholesale market. At that time she also started to learn English by herself because her clients were mainly foreigners. In 1989, she met a new Thai boyfriend who changed her life. He was a "fraud" man running illegal business, which she did not know before. He had a lot of money and pleased her very well, but after he finished his money he forced her to take on very difficult jobs under bad conditions. After many troubles with her boyfriend and disliking her job, she eventually managed to leave her boyfriend and met an Austrian tourist in Bangkok. He invited her to come to Austria and she decided to start a new life. She explained this step with three reasons: first, bad experience with Thai boyfriends; second, the Austrian man seemed very nice and caring; and, third, a life abroad may give her a chance to travel and eventually achieve an overall better life. Noo mentioned that she did not want to look back and thought that she has "nothing to lose".

She came to Austria for the first time with a tourist visa for two months and then they decided to marry. One condition for the marriage and her outbound migration was that her husband must support her family by transferring 5,000 baht to them every month. So Noo moved with her husband to an alpine village in the province of Tyrol where her husband's family runs a tourist guesthouse. In this famous mountain and skiing region she had no other choice than learning to ski. Supported by her Austrian husband and the social environment in the village, she took ski courses and finally became ski instructor herself. Her new home in Austria is rather remote, but she has an Austrian driving licence and is socially well embedded in Tyrol's Thai community and has received social and economic support from Austrian friends and acquaintances. Yet life in Austria is not perceived as the land of milk and honey as it was difficult to learn the language, to adapt towards many rules and regulations and as it is necessary to work hard to create a good life. Noo considers her move to marry and go abroad as the right decision that surely improved her life and the one of her family.

4. Discussion And Conclusion

Bee, Nong and Noo represent the lives of Thai marriage migrants who decided to marry a foreign husband and move abroad after negative experiences – be it in contexts of previous intimate relationships and/or working contexts – in their home country. The Thai proverb *pai tai aow darb na* was used by two of the marriage migrants and by several other Thai women that were interviewed. It was contextualized as a situation where they did not want to look back, where they were ready for a change and where they felt that there is nothing left to lose.

The three women moved to Austria through different migration channels, but in all cases personal relations in the form of a friend or familial networks played a role. While Bee's relationship was arranged through a relative who is a Thai marriage migrant living in Austria herself, Nong was introduced to her Austrian future husband by a friend of hers in Thailand. Noo got to know her husband independently

in a tourist area in Thailand indicating a proposed relation between international tourism and marriage migration. After being settled in Austria, Noo facilitated the bi-national marriage of her younger sister. Also, Bee plans to bring over her son in order to unite the family and improve his economic opportunities. Many Thai households, especially in the northeast region of the country, have experienced domestic and international labour migration for decades, which has contributed to sustain peasant families and diversify family's income. The introduced cases also show the importance of social and transnational connections or migrant networks between migrants and non- or potential future migrants (Massey et al.).

Moreover, the line between different forms of outbound mobility can become blurred. Thai migrants may enter Austria as short time visitors with a tourist visa or as labour migrants, but decide during their stay to enter a long-term intimate relationship. Previously, Austrian immigration regulations allowed a change to visa status of a residence title for family members; however, since laws have become stricter in 2006 and 2011, achieving a secure residence status has become more difficult for “third-country” nationals. The residence permit for family members can be granted to marital partners, same-sex civil partners and minor children of Austrian citizens. Thai marriage migrants seeking Austrian residence titles have to submit their application in Thailand, must be at least 21 years of age and first time applicants must provide evidence of German language skills on A1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Moreover, among other requirements, Austrian citizens married to Thai migrants (or other third-country nationals) have to have proof of sufficient means of subsistence, mainly referring to a monthly net income of approximately 1,300 euros (excluding the rental costs for monthly accommodation) and adequate accommodation. In addition, third country nationals getting divorced from Austrian citizens are required to have proof of a monthly minimum net income or pension of 857.73 euros (“Marriage without Borders”). Thus, without having their own permanent job, a divorce or death of the husband can jeopardize the rights of Austrian residence. In addition, being on one's own, lack of language qualifications can become problematic. Most

Thai migrants have good German skills for communication, but face difficulties with official documents.

The presented case studies also reflect a large age gap between binational partners, which has been considered as one of the major problems of cross-cultural marriages by some authors (Lu and Yang). However, other studies point out that the practice of marrying older men is common in many parts of Asia (Tseng) and is related to ideas of guaranteeing financial security and enhancing the bride's social status (Zimmermann).

The importance of economic remittances shows that migration and its outcome are not only self-directed, but also strongly oriented towards left-behind family members, such as the parents or siblings. In addition, transnational economic flows support community and religious life by sustaining Buddhist events, ceremonies or temple renovation.

Social contact points for Thai migrants living in Austria are Thai businesses, such as restaurants, bars and food stores. Even more importantly, Buddhist temples have become places for both religious and social activities. However, Thai Buddhist temples in Austria are limited to the capital city of Vienna and four provincial capital cities (including Linz, Graz, Klagenfurt, Innsbruck), which makes it more difficult for rural-based migrants to access religious and social activities.

Overall, migration to Austria has been assessed in a positive way because interview partners were able to develop themselves further by acquiring new skills and occupations, adapting towards new social environments and enhancing the life of one's own and the ones of left-behind families. Simultaneously, however, they frequently state that life in Austria is very hard and does not match an imagined paradise-like experience.

To conclude, the highly gendered migration pattern of Thai movements to Austria is not a unique case in Europe as comparative studies on Thai migrants in Germany or the UK has demonstrated (Ruenkaew; Sims). Historically, Thailand has not been a typical sending country for migrants to Austria, and Thai migration has just become relevant in the last two or three decades in the context

of Austrian outbound tourism to Thailand and the increase of cross-cultural marriages between the two countries.

Notes

¹ All names in these portrait descriptions are changed.

² 9,000 bath currently is about 230 euro.

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