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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



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 age 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 month¹ (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

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 life-long 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 interdependence 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 remained 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 difficulties 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 parents 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 journalist, 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 officer, 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 regular financial burden with the family, I 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 geographical 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 fruition. 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 away 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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