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

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

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

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## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE UK'S CONTEXT OF SUPERDIVERSITY**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **THAI MIGRATION TO THE UK: FEMINIZATION AND HETEROGENEITY**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## METHODOLOGY

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

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

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



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

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

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

### **INFORMANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **ETHNIC AND NON-ETHNIC SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THAI IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

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

#### **Highly Educated Thai Immigrant Entrepreneurs**

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

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

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

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

### **Thai Entrepreneurs in Mixed Marriages with British Citizens**

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

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

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

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

### THE CAPITAL POOR AND BUSINESS FAILURE

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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## Thai Immigrant Service-based Entrepreneurship in the UK

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Thai Immigrant Service-based Entrepreneurship in the UK

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