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Practising Privilege. How settling in Thailand enables older Western migrants to enact privilege over local people

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed empirical account of how older Western migrants in Thailand (N: 20) negotiate, practice, and justify their privilege in Thai society to secure the 'good' life they are seeking through migration. The article shows that they justify their economic privilege relative to locals by describing it as unavoidable and accepted by Thais around them. They are also able to live a 'good' life because they benefit from global racialised hierarchies built on the illusion of their dominance and superiority vis-à-vis the local population. To this end, they claim engagement with and knowledge of Thailand, its people, and culture and they position themselves in it. Women and men seem to have very distinct ways of enacting their privilege. Women practice their privilege through the consumption for their own gratification of reconstructed and stereotypical understandings of Thai culture, cast as primitive, spiritual and authentic. Men, instead, practice privilege in the form of a new-found masculinity, sexuality and status that ageing has deprived them of in Western societies. In both cases, their understandings of Thai society and culture are superficial or simply inaccurate. Their narrow and stereotypical views of Thailand rather serve to justify their individual projects for self-gratification, while at the same time allowing them to see themselves as morally superior to local people's values, but also to the 'bad', exploitative, and racist Westerners.

Keywords: privilege; Thailand; retirement migration; lifestyle migration

Introduction

Since the 1980s, international retirement migration has increased in size and geographical reach. While previously this migration predominantly took place between North and South Europe (O'Reilly 2000; Oliver 2008), retirees from Europe and North America are now moving in large numbers to the global South, and this trend is expected to continue (Dixon et al 2006; Howard 2008; Croucher 2009; Green 2015; Hayes 2015). Several Southeast Asian countries are presenting themselves as ideal destinations for international retirees (Toyota and Xiang 2012). Thailand in particular has become

one of the preferred destinations for Western retired migrants in Asia, with more than eighty thousand foreigners applying for a Retirement visa in 2018 (Boonbandit 2019). Western retirement migrants move seeking what they consider to be the 'good life'. Part of the broader category of 'lifestyle migrants', they are relatively affluent and, because of global racialized hierarchies, socially privileged in relation to people in the country of destination (Benson and O'Reilly 2018). Settlement in a new country and in its social context can heightened lifestyle migrants' privilege and power. Often, they live a more luxurious life than the local communities. They may also live out and negotiate their privilege in their everyday lives and they develop narratives that justify their privileged social position in the host society.

This article provides a detailed empirical account of how Western lifestyle retired migrants negotiate, practice, and justify their privilege through their everyday lives in Thailand. It does so by focusing on their social relations with: Thai society and people, including intimate relations; other Westerners living in Thailand; and people from their home country. The analysis also examines if and how the constructions and justifications of privilege vary between men and women. We analyse 20 interviews conducted with North American, European, and Australian migrants aged 60 and above, who are retired and who live in Thailand at least five months of the year. We address the following research questions: *How do retired lifestyle migrants from Western countries construct and justify their privileged social position in Thailand?* and *How does gender shape the enactment of their privilege?* The analysis of how privilege is constructed and maintained by relatively privileged retired lifestyle migrants offers insights into how their search for a 'good life' is made possible by systems of dominance and oppression which position Western retirees and Thai people relative to each other.

In examining the negotiations of privilege of Western retired migrants in Thailand, the article makes four contributions to the literature on retirement and lifestyle migration. First, it provides a detailed empirical account of how retirement migrants' privilege is negotiated, justified and maintained, whereas most existing research analyses their privilege at structural level. Second, it brings forward the different ways in which men and women enact and deal with their privilege. Third, the article contributes empirically to the field by focusing on Thailand, which is estimated to be one of the main destinations for Western retirement migrants in Southeast Asia, and yet seldom the object of research in this field. Finally, it brings novel insights on this specific group of migrants. The existing research on Western migration to Thailand tends to focus on men's experiences because of the high male-to-female ratio of this migration flow¹. We have interviewed nine women to represent their

¹ According to the 2010 Thai Census, three quarters of Western foreigners living in Thailand are men (Housa et al. 2014).

experiences of migration and privilege and thus tell their 'untold story' in the context of Western retirement migration to Thailand.

In the following, we first outline how the literature on lifestyle migration has addressed issues of privilege and we discuss the relational character of privilege in the context of Western retirement migration to Thailand, thus setting out the analytical framework that informs this study. We then present the data on which we base this article and set out the context of Western migration to Thailand. The empirical sections of the article address, first, how retired women and men see migration to Thailand as a means for self-realisation, how this is underpinned by their privilege, and how the strategies to search and maintain privilege are enacted and vary by gender. In the second empirical section we move from the dynamics of self-identity constructions at the individual level, to the level of social interactions. We show how Western retired lifestyle migrants construct and seek justification for their privilege in their social relationships with Thais and other Westerners. In the concluding section, we draw the findings together and discuss how retired lifestyle migrants' success in finding a better life is built upon systems of domination which rely on the oppression of one group (in this case, local Thais) to generate privilege for another (retired lifestyle migrants).

Relational privilege among lifestyle migrants

The participants in this study are relatively affluent individuals from Western countries who have migrated to meet their aspirations of a better way of living. As such, they are 'lifestyle migrants' who embark upon a project of fulfilment, escapism, and self-realisation (O'Reilly and Benson 2015). The relationship between privilege and lifestyle migration has been well researched. These migrants are described as 'relatively privileged' compared to the local population where they relocate. They benefit from relative economic privilege and accumulated disposable wealth that enables them to travel, relocate and often become second-home owners in countries with lower standards of living (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; 2018; Korpela 2010; Hayes 2015; Benson 2013; 2019).

More recently, scholars have highlighted that lifestyle migrants' privilege does not only originate from their relative individual wealth, and research increasingly considers the structural conditions that enable lifestyle migration in the first place (Benson and Osbaldiston 2016)². As "white" citizens of Western nation states, lifestyle migrants benefit from global racialised hierarchies that give them

² Recent research argues that lifestyle migration should be understood at the intersection of privilege and vulnerability as some lifestyle migrants, although relatively privileged, also face challenges related to depleted finances (Green 2014; Hayes 2015); gender (Croucher 2009); and ageing (Hall 2019; Lafferty and Mahler this issue) which makes their position vulnerable in relation to social structures in the country of residence. We acknowledge the risks of vulnerability of lifestyle migrants, but it falls outside the aims of this article to further engage in these debates.

access to social status, resources, and institutional and social power that citizens of economically less advanced countries do not possess on a global scale (Benson 2019). They possess 'unearned privilege' (Bailey 1998), i.e. privilege that is not the result of their individual capabilities, but of their group membership. Their privilege enables lifestyle migrants relative ease of travel in another country (which is however constrained by state regulations, as we will discuss later). As noted by Leonard (2008) white people can migrate with a confidence and sense of privilege not shared by people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. At destination, they often face very few pressures to socially assimilate compared to migrants from the global South to the global North (Croucher 2012).

Privilege is maintained by widely shared cultural ideologies which provide the moral and intellectual justification for group dominance (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). The system of domination that positions 'white' Westerners as superior, rests on imaginaries of other groups as exotic, inferior, and possibly erotic. As pointed out by Statham (this issue) with regard to Western men's attitudes to Thai women, although racial stereotypes, these imaginaries are 'social facts' that often shape the behaviour of Westerners in Thailand and how they treat Thais. Furthermore, retired lifestyle migrants also benefit from the self-categorisation that positions them structurally and morally as a 'good migrant' compared to other immigrants. They compare themselves to immigrants from the global South in their home countries or to other migrants in the country of residence, who are both seen to contribute little to the society of settlement while gaining benefits from living there (Cranston 2017).

In their home country, Westerners are not necessarily aware of how the mechanisms of privilege benefit them. In fact, one of the key characteristics of privilege is its invisibility to the eyes of the privileged ones who are unlikely to be aware of how others may not have access to the benefits that they receive (McIntosh 1992). Migration can change this. As noted by Benson "in crossing borders, [lifestyle] migrants enter into new hierarchies and find themselves variously positioned within and in relation to local social structures; yet, global asymmetries predispose their privilege to be re-validated and perhaps even enhanced in these settings" (2019: 25). This means that with migration and settlement, particularly in economically less advanced countries, lifestyle migrants act to sustain and justify their privilege. They do not necessarily do this because they hold oppressive thoughts. In fact, many would describe themselves as being well-travelled and progressive. They enact their privilege because they are in a social context in which they can live out internalised dominant identities built on the illusion of their dominance and superiority vis-à-vis the local population. This illusion is justified by global systems of dominations which confer privilege to groups such as 'white' migrants originating from powerful nation-states and with access to resources, and symbolic and

institutional power. Migration also enables some disadvantaged groups to become part of the privileged. In particular, women, who are traditionally disadvantaged by patriarchal normative social practices in their homeland, benefit from global racialised structures of domination and become part of the privileged in the destination country. The ways in which previously disadvantaged groups deal with their new-found privilege in the settlement country can vary from the ways in which an already privileged group (white, heterosexual men) enacts and reproduces its privilege. This article sets out to bring to light these differences.

Privilege is constructed in intergroup relations that give one group the dominant position in relation to others (Sidanius and Pratt 1999). We argue that retired lifestyle Western migrants living in Thailand position themselves in a network of social relations to construct and justify their privilege. We identify three significant relations: with Thais; with other Westerners in Thailand; and with the home country. In their time in Thailand, Western retirees form formal relations with Thais in the form of daily encounters with maids, neighbours, shop owners, etc. In addition, many make retirees enter a relationship with a Thai. In our sample, six male participants in the sample are in a long-lasting intimate relationship with a Thai, while the female participants have no such engagements. In these encounters, Western retirees have to navigate their own taken-for-granted assumptions of cultural representations of Thai people and in so doing, they position themselves in relation to Thai society. Western migrants also relate themselves to the institutional structures and laws put in place by the Thai state that regulate their ability to stay long-term. The degree to which they can access formal rights matters for their experience of living in Thailand and for their enactment of privilege³. The Thai state has enacted some regulations (e.g. strict long-term visa regulations) that effectively create a hierarchy of migrants with a clear preference for wealthier Western migrants which impacts on the status and opportunities of migrants who are not part of this group.

A second important relationship that shapes the participants' position in Thailand is that with other Western migrants in the country. As noted by Cranston in the case of British migrants in Singapore (2017), Western migrants forge an identity in relation to the place of stay as well as also in comparison to other migrants. In the case of Thailand, the participants compare themselves to friends and spouses with whom they feel moral and behavioural affinity. They also contrast themselves to 'bad' Westerners who, in their opinion, behave in exploitative and racist ways towards Thais. The self-categorisation as 'good' migrants confers the participants both a sense of privilege and desirability in Thai society.

³ See also Statham (this issue) on how access to formal rights matters for the lives of Thai women in a partnership with a Western man.

Western migrants' position in Thailand is finally shaped by their relationship with their country of origin. They deal with obligations to their natal family in a context where many are living a second youth and, in some cases, a new-found masculinity by engaging in sexual relationships with much younger Thais (Farrer 2011; Botterill 2016). Lifestyle migrants' privilege in the destination country is also shaped by the regulations imposed by their home country's government. Their state pensions may be frozen, and they may be unable to claim social benefits and access public health services in their country of origin. These institutional constraints put a limit to the degree to which they can practice their privilege in a new location as they may impact negatively on their finances and on their ability to access health care. In this article, we examine how lifestyle retired migrants negotiate these three relations to construct, enact, and justify their privilege in Thai society, thus emphasising the relational character of privilege.

Method and data

In this study, we draw from qualitative interview data collected in two studies on transnational retirement migration to Thailand in 2014 and 2016-2017⁴. The semi-structured interviews aim to collect information on retirees' expectations about life in Thailand; their experiences of migration and settlement; their engagement with Thais and other Westerners in Thailand; and their contact with the home country and natal family. We conducted 20 interviews with "white", North American, European, and Australian citizens, aged 60 years and above, who are retired and who live in Thailand for at least five months of the year. Participants were recruited through advertisements on social media and snowball sampling. Seventeen of the 20 participants reside in Thailand permanently. Eleven interviewees are men, and six are in a long-lasting relationship with a Thai. Existing research on Westerners in Thailand focuses on the experiences of heterosexual men which reflects the high sex-ratio of male to female Western migrants to Thailand (circa 80% are men, see Introduction). To sensitise to possible differences within this group of migrants, and to add 'untold stories', we have included nine women, two of whom live in Thailand with their Western husband. Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the interview sample.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

⁴ Interviews in 2014 were conducted by Christina Vogler for her dissertation *Receiving and Providing Care Abroad. Interactions between International Retirement Migration and the Elderly Care Sector in Chiang Mai, Thailand*. The data from 2016-2017 was collected within the framework of the project "Gender, transnational migration and cultural interactions in Thailand", partially funded by the Harry Kroto Fellowship (ref nr. HKT002).

The participants live in the regions of Chiang Mai (n: 10), Bangkok (n: 3), Isaan (n: 2), and in the village of 'Ban Thale⁵', in Parachuap Khiri Khan (n: 5). Chiang Mai is a popular retirement city due to a cooler climate compared to the south, beautiful surroundings, a rich cultural life, an extended community of Western retirees, and several eldercare homes targeting Western retirees. Bangkok, the country's capital city, tends to attract Westerners who have retired in Thailand after working for international organisations there. Isaan is the north-eastern rural region in Thailand and one of the poorest. Many Western men move there as their Thai partner, who they have often met in more touristic areas in the south, is originally from this part of the country. Finally, 'Ban Thale' is a fishing village in the province of Parachuap Khiri Khan on the western shores of the Gulf of Thailand, and it has become popular with Scandinavians in the last 15 years. Scandinavian entrepreneurs have built dozens of serviced gated communities of about 20 houses each, targeting predominantly Swedes and Danes. This has transformed the village and led to the development of a small local service-oriented economy with restaurants, massage parlours, supermarkets stocking Scandinavian food items, and a Swedish School open during the high season (November to March).

All interviews, lasting between one and two hours, were conducted in the interviewee's native language (English, German or Swedish) and all but two have been audio taped and transcribed. Where the interviewee would not agree on being recorded, the researcher wrote detailed field notes after the interview. All interviewees have been anonymised. We analyse the interviews by identifying narratives that refer to the participants' relations to 1. Thai people; 2. other Westerners; and 3. their family and home country. Narratives, as stories people tell to make sense of the world and of their social positions in it (Somers 1994), reflect deeply ingrained and shared perceptions of groups and nationalities. The stories told by members of dominant groups (such as 'white' Westerners) provide the moral and intellectual justifications for group-based social hierarchies (Sidanius and Pratt 1999). Thus, to study how retired Westerners in Thailand talk about their migration experiences and their daily interactions with their home land, Thai society, and other Western migrants, sheds light onto the norms and sets of justifications that legitimate their (self) positioning as privileged individuals in Thailand. Throughout the process of identifying narratives at work in the material, we direct our attention to how the participants' express and deal with their privilege, and to how these narratives might differ between migrant men and women.

Contextualising retirement migration to Thailand

Thailand has been a destination for Westerners since the late 1950s when the government initiated the development of tourism infrastructures and encouraged foreign investment in the tourism

⁵ Pseudonym

sector. Thailand attracted Western visitors fascinated by an image of the country as “an exotic, enchanted kingdom in the Orient” (Cohen 2001, 2). Following the 1967 ‘Rest & Recreation’ agreement between the Thai and the American governments, the country became one of the main destinations for American soldiers. This changed the emphasis in the tourist sector from the earlier cultural attractions, to sex and recreational activities adding prostitution-oriented tourism to the already existing exotic and cultural tourism. Contemporary migration to Thailand is influenced by these developments and the resultant Western imaginings of the country and its people. Indeed, good weather, low cost of living and culture are some of the country’s attraction points for Westerners who decide to retire full- or part-time in Thailand (Housa et al. 2014), as is the availability of attractive sexual partners (Howard 2008).

It is difficult to claim with certainty how many Western retirees live in Thailand. Recent data from the Thai Government suggests that in 2018, circa 80.000 foreigners applied for a Retirement Visa, up from over 10.000 applications in 2005 (Boonbandit 2019; Tangchitnusorn 2017). Moreover, many retirees live in Thailand on other visas, including spouse visa; one-year multiple entry visa; or 30-days tourist visa that they renew by applying for a new visa at a consulate or embassy overseas. Our research suggests that some retirees do not register their relocation with the authorities and are officially still residing in the country of origin, thus complicating the picture further. Estimates suggest that the overwhelming majority of these retirees are men, that they are on average younger than retirement migrants in Europe, and that they have an average monthly income of circa £2,000 (Tangchitnusorn 2017), although some live on less than £800 a month (Husa et al. 2014; Green 2015).

The Thai Government has played a significant role in encouraging foreign retirees to relocate to Thailand and it has supported the industries involved in retirement migration as part of the country’s national development strategies (Toyota and Xian 2012). In 1998, the Ministry of Commerce, supported by the Thai Government, initiated the “Long-stay and Health Care Project”. Private companies such as the Thailand Longstay company Ltd and the Thailand Elite Ltd were established in the early 2000s with the endorsement of the Tourism Authority of Thailand to support long-stay tourism of capital-strong individuals. The government has developed visa schemes that target foreign retirees since the 1980s. These schemes have changed over time to encourage the migration of wealthy Westerners. Currently, the main requirements for a one-year retirement visa is that the applicant has to be 50-years old or above and has to be able to prove bank savings of at least THB 800.000 (ca £20.000) in a Thai bank for at least two months prior to applying for the visa, or a monthly income of at least THB 65.000 (ca £1.700). A second visa scheme, introduced in 2016, allows for a stay of 10 years and targets applicants aged 50 and above, who come from Japan,

Australia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Canada, and United States of America, and who can demonstrate to have at least three million Baht (ca £80.000) in a Thai bank, or 1.8 million Baht (ca £47.000) in a Thai bank and an annual income of not less than 1.2 million Baht (ca £31.000). People on these visas are not allowed to work. In addition, property and business ownership and access to public health care are restricted for non-nationals.

The research participants on a higher pension rate describe obtaining a retirement visa as simple:

I'm on a Retirement visa. It's easy to get, you just have to meet the minimum requirements – that's 800.000 Baht, you have to have an [bank] account and then you get a confirmation from the bank. Then you get that [a Retirement visa] [...] it's only a form and it's very easy if you meet the financial conditions. (Marco, 2014)

Marco, who is a 76 years old retired business man living in Chiang Mai, is in a privileged position because of his financial capital. To him, obtaining a retirement visa is about filling a form. Other respondents, who do not have the same disposable income, have developed strategies to circumvent the income expectations put by the Thai government to acquire a retirement visa. For instance, Tove and her husband, a Swedish couple living permanently in Ban Thale, have applied for a retirement visa six months apart from each other so that they can move THB 800.000 between their respective Thai bank accounts and thus meet the financial requirements for a visa.

The immigration policies targeting Western long-stay migrants have become increasingly restrictive for lower income Westerners, and their effects are felt by retired migrants who wish to live in Thailand. This is illustrated by Julian, a 69 years old Swiss living in Chiang Mai.

I missed the renewal of my retirement visa. That was a pretty heavy bureaucratic struggle [...] on the last day [before the tourist visa expired] I went to Burma and back again and I was not allowed to enter on the same visa. I had to enter on a tourist visa that gave me only 15 days. Then I booked a return flight to get a longer tourist visa. [...] the bureaucracy is a cracking point. Most *farang*⁶ need some help and it's a hassle when you get to a certain age. (Julian, 2014)

Julian first tried to renew his visa by engaging in 'visa running' across the Thai-Burmese border, but his attempt was unsuccessful. The Thai government increased migration controls in 2006 to stop economic migrants from the neighbouring countries to enter Thailand an unlimited number of times, and now foreigners coming to Thailand overland can stay lawfully in Thailand for only 15 days.

⁶ *Farang* is Thai word used to describe white Westerners.

Visitors arriving by air receive instead a 30 days visa waiver. Julian, and many late-life Western migrants who were previously crossing national borders to renew their visa, was affected by these new policies and had to buy a return international flight so that he could qualify for a 30 days visa waiver.

In Spring 2019, the Thai government has introduced the requirement that foreign retirees must be covered by a health insurance for the duration of their stay. This aims to limit the migration of poorer Western retirees. In fact, many retired lifestyle migrants cannot afford private health insurance due to their age and chronic illnesses. Instead, they have to rely on the support offered by their country of origin, which entails returning to receive health and elder care in their home country. As expressed by a group of retired Swedes in Isaan interviewed for the magazine ScandAsia:

You either need to have a private insurance, which is difficult and expensive to get when you're a senior, or you need to pay for service here in Thailand or you'll have to buy plane tickets back and forth to Sweden, so there's no way of avoiding paying and if you don't pay you'll die. (Sonne 2016)

While Western retirees are free to enter the country short-term, only wealthy retirees are truly free to settle in. Their settlement is however limited both in time (as their visa is temporary and can be revoked), and in practice (as they have no rights to own land outright, own a business, work, access public healthcare) and as such they are never fully able to settle in Thailand hassle-free. Their privilege is enacted not so much in their mobility, but rather in their social relations with Thais, other Westerners in Thailand, and with their natal family, as discussed in the following sections.

Searching the good life. Escapism and the search for the self

Retired lifestyle migrants relocate because they imagine a better quality of life in Thailand. Our data suggest that the search for a better life quality in Thailand is tightly interlinked to a project of self (re)affirmation, and that women and men engage with this differently. Thailand is often presented by popular media and the tourism industry as the 'land of smiles' and Thais are depicted as gentle, non-materialistic people. These portrayals were advanced by the women who participated in the research. Many are attracted to what they see Thailand's authenticity:

We were riding our bikes in the village [Ban Thale] and I just had this fantastic feeling that everything was so... genuine! (Tove, 2017)

Authenticity is defined as something genuine, true and original. Life in Thailand is fundamentally different from their lives in Europe which are described as stressful and alienating. For instance, Sanna, a retired primary school teacher, recounts how financial cuts affected her job:

I felt ... it became so different ... I remember asking my mother 'How could you let me become a school teacher?' and then she'd say 'It wasn't like that when you graduated Sanna'. It's what it became. As soon as something worked, they had to change things. If there was staff who worked well together they [the administration] split them. So I felt that that's enough. I don't want to do this anymore. [...] and then the classes got bigger and bigger, and they were making staff redundant all the time. (Sanna, 2017)

Three Swiss female retirees living in an eldercare facility in Chiang Mai refer to their lives in Switzerland in a similar way and compare it to life in Thailand:

Anna: when I go back to Switzerland, I feel that I have to do this and the other in one week. And I'm immediately stressed out.

Mary: me too!

Julia: It's the environment [in Switzerland] that does it...

Anna: I spoke about it with an astrologer and she gave a very clear answer. She said: 'You know, Switzerland is a Mars country. Mars is the warrior who gets through, the makers, the one who is determined. [...] these are Mars' qualities and it is why Switzerland has become such a wealthy country and people who live there struggle with life. It's money, money, and everything that is defined by money. While Thailand is a Venus country. Venus is fluid. She is present. She is love. (2014)

These narratives pitch Western and Thai societies as opposite. One is stressful, masculine, and alienating while the other is peaceful and feminine. This representation of Thailand rests on a romanticised portrayal of the country as a rural society populated by near-to-nature farmers who can live following the seasons:

Previously, 100 years ago, they [Thais] were rice farmers. They planted rice and that was hard work, no question. But the bananas grow behind the house and the herbs grow in the forest [...] after three month they have to harvest. It's a family life, they all get together and then they have the rice. [...] then you have to wait and watch the field regenerate (Anna, 2014)

This depiction sees Thais as pure and innocent, with a 'softer attitude towards people' (Tove, 2017) and 'always smiling' (Karin, 2017). Their life, although physically tiring, is not punitive as nature provides plenty of food 'behind the house'. The idealised depiction of rural and peaceful Thailand is in stark contrast with the country's recent socio-economic development (see Introduction). In the last 30 years, the Thai economy has been radically transformed by globalisation and has experienced intense urbanization and agro-industrialization. These developments have led to significant changes

in rural Thailand concerning new household forms, new gender relations and new urban/rural relations (Sunanta and Angeles 2013; Rigg 2019). This notwithstanding, the female participants imagine the community's ethos to be about closeness to nature and slow-paced life. Their quest for authenticity can only work if the Thai Other is positioned as pre-modern, frozen in a mythical past. Thai modernity, made obvious when they visit larger cities such as Hua Hin or Bangkok, is avoided:

Last time I was in Bangkok I was there 20 minutes. To the embassy to get a new passport, down to the reception to pay, in the taxi and out of there. [...] I think it's fun to go to Hua Hin but I am so happy when I come home again. (Sanna, 2017)

Images of Thais as simple, laid-back, and friendly are based on superficial and instrumental relationships with the local population. Most female interviewees live a self-segregated life, removed from the rest of the locality they live in, which they only enter to shop or eat out. Language is a barrier. The interviewees, with one exception, speak only enough Thai to say, "Please clean the windows" as Julia, a Swiss retiree in Chiang Mai, acknowledges. By ignoring the toil that local people put into their work and by depicting them as 'friendly Thais', the participants create an image of Thai culture and society as happy, authentic and religiously devout that fits their search for an authentic life.

The female interviewees also see Thailand as an attractive space where they can express their spirituality. Many speak about a spiritual connection to Thailand and refer to Buddhism:

I think I must have a cosmic relation to Thailand. When I was 11 years old, I saw a picture of a monk and the hand of Buddha and I thought: I have to go there. And that was at the time when no one went to Thailand. [...] I just feel good here, I'm much freer. The soul can breathe, I have air. (Anna, 2014)

As soon as I walked in the house [in Thailand] I felt it. I was home for the first time. I know I was here in a different life, so moving here made sense (Sanna, 2017)

The narratives about having a unique spiritual bond with the country are used to legitimise their position relative to Thai society, and the local people and places where they live. By presenting themselves as spiritually connected to the country, they are making it their rightful place to be. This enables them to disregard the negative cultural and socioeconomic impacts of their presence on the microcosmos of the local society. Through their narratives of spiritual belonging to Thailand, they also position themselves as bearers of a unique understanding of Thai society. Some women claim that since living in Thailand, they have embraced Buddhism and Thai culture. For instance, during my meeting with Sanna in her home in Ban Thale, I noticed a tattoo on her arm and asked her about it. She claimed that it represented a blessing from Buddha that she had done locally to show her spiritual closeness to Buddha, also displayed in the Buddhist amulet hanging on her necklace. I later showed a

picture of her tattoo to Thai colleagues who were unable to recognise the symbol or to decipher what it was supposed to stand for. Similarly, during the fieldwork in Ban Thale, I noted that many Westerners' houses were decorated with wooden statues of the Buddha placed often on the patio. These effigies can be purchased easily across the country, but they are intended for worship, and most ordinary Thai people find it disrespectful that they are used as home decorations. The way in which some participants use them, clearly lacks any understanding of the meaning Buddha images have for Thais. It also illustrates how Western retirement migrants utilise local culture and religion as a product to be purchased and consumed, together with other spiritual experiences, for what they see as their own personal growth, inner balance, and well-being.

The male research participants also move to Thailand in search of a better life. In Thailand they are not searching for an authentic and spiritual life, however. Instead most male participants indicate that in Thailand they have a better life because they have found a second youth and a new-found masculinity that, as ageing men, they had lost in the West. Many male participants believe they look younger compared to Thais of the same age. For instance, Peter, a 69 years old Swede, remarks on his youthfulness:

I don't feel old. My [Thai] in-laws are almost 10 years younger than me, but they are in such bad shape! I volunteered as tourism police for five years together with other retirees, but no-one believed us when we told them how old we were! (Peter, 2016)

Similarly, Per, who was 65 years old when we met him, feels that most Thais take him to be younger than he is:

Most people think that I'm much younger than I really am. So that a Thai who is 65 years old looks much older. Yes, they think I'm in my fifties. (Per, 2017)

Both men pay little consideration to the fact that the people they are comparing themselves to belong to the poorest strata in Thai society, with little access to public healthcare and a limited pension of 500 THB (ca £12)⁷, while they have benefitted from a 'cradle-to-grave' existence in a Western welfare state. Peter's in-laws depend on the varying profit from their rice farm and kitchen garden. Rather than being aware of the material realities that surround them and their wives' families, Peter and Per merely pride themselves on their youthfulness, also demonstrated in Peter's case by his two youngest children aged eight and five at the time of the interview. To Peter, the lack of eldercare in Thailand is not necessarily a problem, as society sees to its poorest:

⁷ This is the sum that Peter claims his in-laws receive every month in state pension.

There is no eldercare, but then the climate is different [than in Europe] and according to Buddhism Thais help each other with food. You can hardly see people starving here. People always help with some rice or whatever they have. (Peter, 2016)

Although acknowledging the existence of poverty and state support is limited, Peter argues that Thai culture and values are sufficient to aid destitute Thais and elder citizens. While noticing poverty around them, the participants use their imaginings of Thai people as generous to the poor as an excuse to ignore what might have caused this poverty or consider how their presence in the local community might contribute to exacerbating economic inequalities. With poverty (and their role in it) made invisible, retired lifestyle migrants can seek a privileged and glamorous spirituality or a confirmation of their youthful body.

Narratives about re-found youth are often linked to masculinity and virility. In a group interview with four men from the United States and Australia, the participants talked about intimate relationships between Westerners and Thai women. They agreed that Thais and Westerners find these relationships interesting because they are “exotic” and that being with a Thai woman makes them “mentally feel like they are 18 years old again” (Tom and David, field notes, 2014). While the female participants construct Thais as “primitive”, many male interviewees cast the local population, and particularly women, as belonging to an imaginary past, i.e. their own patriarchal (re)constructions of society before women’s liberation when allegedly women exclusively took care of the family. Tom, a 67-years old retired American academic who lives in Chiang Mai with his Thai wife, illustrates this when he says that a man has to be fully responsible for their Thai wife. As a baby boomer, he went through what he calls ‘the gender change’. By that he means that he grew up with traditional gender roles but lived through the change in gender relations in the USA. He sees life in Thailand “like stepping back in time” where his Thai wife, 29 years to him junior, has been traditionally raised in a farming family to look after her husband who is expected to look after the family’s finances (Field notes, 2014). In Tom’s representation, Thai women are docile, traditional, and primarily interested in caring for their family. Thai family culture is essentialised and Thai women are discursively frozen in a distant, melancholically remembered past when gender roles were allegedly simpler. The flip-side of the coin of these stereotypical representation of Thai women is that Western men are self-glorified as ‘good husbands’ and ‘providers’ (see Kanchanachitra and Chuenglertsiri, this issue). In addition to being questionable (see Statham, this issue), such claims ignore Thai gendered familial obligations in the form of ‘daughter duty’, a culturally specific role largely performed by women to meet familial and community obligations (Angeles and Sunanta 2009). This myopic view of Thai culture and society is used to justify their individual projects for self-gratification, while at the same time allowing them to see themselves as morally superior to local people.

For older Western males finding a new relationship can be difficult in their country of origin, as they may not be attractive to Western women because of their age. In Thailand many participants may have a better life in this respect. Here they can find a local younger sexual partner and re-discover their virility, something that Ole, a Swedish 68 years-old retiree living in Isaan with his Thai wife, boasts about:

They [Thais] are shy...I'm more liberal and so when at the beginning [of his life in Thailand] I met some Thai girls I thought we could have a shower together and that was a shock to the girls. They were so shy, so shy that they turned their back on me you know? They had never done something like that. Shower together and sleep naked together. No, no, no. they'd wrap a towel around themselves and then they would crawl in bed and only then they would take the towel away. (Ole, 2016)

Ole describes himself as more audacious than young Thai women. He infantilises the Thai women with whom he had sexual relations with by depicting them as timid, while ignoring the possibility that they might have found him old, flabby, and far from handsome. This narratives of sexual liberation and prowess coincides with contemporary Western constructions of 'successful' male ageing, and linked to taking up new sports and travel, and enjoy an active, potent sexual life (Calasanti and King 2005). The search for active, sexual ageing is linked to a logic that casts men as consumers in control of their ageing bodies and who can purchase products that enable them to reach 'successful' ageing. Men who do not have access to the money that enables them to purchase full and 'successful' lives of travel, sports, and sex, find relocation to countries such as Thailand a way to achieve 'success' thus defined.

The ways in which men approach a potential relationship with a Thai are illustrative of how they exert their power and privilege in relation to local people. Some participants equate their first months in Thailand to entering a sexual playground:

You know, in Pattaya you can go home with any girl, whomever, you don't need to have met her before. Everybody is for sale. Almost everyone, there are obviously exceptions, but I'd say that 90% are for sale. They are there to meet a *farang* and have a better life. When I first came, I tested a few girls to find the right one you know. I could pick a cleaner in a mall, a bank clerk, whatever. Everyone was for sale. No problem. Everyone was for sale. That's how it is, unfortunately. (Ole, 2016)

Ole, who retired to Thailand after realising that his modest pension of about 5000 Swedish Crowns (ca £400) would not allow him to live comfortably in Europe, was keen on meeting a companion. To increase the chances to meet the 'right' one, he literally shopped around for a woman in Pattaya, a

sea-side town famous for its sex industry. His attitude to Thai women illustrates the privilege of male Westerners who present themselves as potential consumers of female bodies, while Thai women are objectified (by being described as 'girls' to be 'tested') and considered as subservient and obedient, as illustrated by Tom earlier.

The narratives of new-found youth and masculinity created by the male participants indicate that, to them, being in Thailand is about being free from their own society's norms where, as older men, they have a declining status. This is well illustrated by how they justify the age differences between them and their Thai partners to their family back home. While the age difference in a Thai-Western couple is on average about 15 years (Statham, this issue), it is relatively common to see couples where the age differential is much bigger and difficult to justify in the eyes of fellow Westerners. Some participants say that the age gap between them and their partner is frowned upon by their natal family. Ties often break up because the children disapprove of their fathers being in a relationship with someone much younger, as illustrated below.

My children, especially my youngest daughter who's almost the same age as my wife, have reacted very strongly about our relationship. She wasn't at all happy when I told her that I met a girl from here. (Peter, 2016)

Peter decided to move to Thailand in 2005 as he was approaching retirement age and was looking for a warmer and more affordable place to live. He claims that meeting a partner was not part of his plan, but nevertheless, that same year he met a Thai woman who became his third wife. She is 34 years to him junior and they now have two children together. This age gap is a source of conflict between Peter and his youngest daughter from a previous marriage. It seems that Peter's daughter considers her father's relationship as age-inappropriate and that affected her relationship with him negatively.

To justify relationships with younger women or with former sex-workers, the male participants frame the stories about their relationships with an aura of innocence. These stories depict them as good-hearted and generous to their Thai partners and their families, a portrayal that is made clearer when they compare themselves to Thai men. For instance, Peter frames his meeting with his 34 years younger Thai wife as a story of good-will and gallantry:

Just after the tsunami, I went down to Phuket to see [what had happened] with my own eyes and if I could do something to help. I worked with computers so perhaps I could work there, help with something. But they didn't need my help. And I happened to run into a woman in the street, and I accidentally knocked her over so we had coffee [after the accident] and now we're married! Many old people come here and they want to meet a

Thai girl. I had been single for 10 years when I met her so... [I wasn't planning on it] I only wanted to have a nice retirement! [...] [My youngest daughter] was not at all happy when I told her that I met a girl from here and the funny thing was that she asked how old [my girlfriend] was and I told her what I thought, but I was wrong by 10 years because I'd only seen her Thai ID-card but it only had Thai dates and there is a difference [with the Gregorian calendar] of 543 years. And I did ask a guy how to calculate the difference... and I did, but [I was wrong]... in reality she was 22 when we met, and I thought she was 32 up until we got married in 2007! [...] And [when we married] that's when I reacted, but I didn't do it before because I thought that mentally she is rather grown up. The way I see her opinions and that. She could have been 32 instead of 22 when I met her. It was a surprise. (Peter 2016)

Peter makes a clear effort to justify his relationship. He explains that they met by accident and that he was not on the lookout for a younger partner as many male retirees in his opinion are. While we are not questioning if they met by chance, it is implausible that Peter did not realise the significant age gap between him and his partner during the five years before they married. He frames a narrative of newly found youth and virility with an aura of innocence that justifies his behaviour to a female European interviewer, as well as to his family and friends in Sweden. He creates a story that is difficult to criticise: he was in Phuket because he was keen to volunteer after the tragic events of 2004⁸. There, he knocked over a young woman but, gallantly, invited her for coffee to apologise and they fell in love.

The participants who explicitly engaged with sex tourism before meeting their partner use a similar frame of innocence to justify their buying sex, which is often considered unacceptable by Western norms. Ole explains below his view and experience of the sex industry in Thailand:

The idea [to support a Thai family from Isaan] is that girls have to get a job at all costs and then send the money back to their mum. That's how it is. That's why you see so many girls from poor Isaan who work in bars and massage parlours. They dream about meeting a rich *farang* so they can move back to the village with lots of money [...] The girls have to do that [become sex workers] to support their families. They are expected to take any job as long as they can send money home. That's the girls who do that, the boys are supposed to play cards and drink Thai whisky. That's the culture here and it's a shame that all responsibility falls on the girl in a family. She has to quit school earlier so that men can have an education that they don't even use. (Ole, 2016)

⁸ On December 26th, 2004 a series of large tsunamis hit the coasts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand killing more than 230.000 people and causing major disruptions to living conditions and commerce in these countries. 543 Swedes died, and a further 1500 were injured, turning this event into a national trauma.

Similarly to the case of Peter who justifies his relationship with a much younger Thai women by using a narrative of innocence, Ole explains his frequent visits to bars in Pattaya to a female European interviewer by positioning himself and other Westerners as a do-gooders who can help Thai women in need. There is no consideration of his role in sustaining an exploitative sex industry. Instead, prostitution is explained as a sorry side of Thai culture, something that innocent “girls” are forced to enter to support their family. Innocence stories such as the ones described here, illustrate how male retired Westerners enact their privilege relative to Thais. Echoing colonial narratives of the white man saviour, they portray themselves as ‘good’ Western men who can save Thai women from prostitution. This pitches them as superior to Thai men who, because of what Ole perceives to be a “Thai culture” of misogyny violence and drunkenness, are irresponsible and do not mind seeing their female family members becoming sex workers.

Living with and enacting privilege

Retired lifestyle migrants not only justify their privilege by distorting Thai culture and spirituality, as illustrated above. They also enact and validate their privilege in their everyday lives in Thailand. Many respondents plainly admit thriving with their new privileged life. Ole, for instance, who receives a modest monthly state pension of 5000 SEK (ca £400), describes his life in Isaan as being ‘very comfortable’ with ‘a house, car, mopeds, computers and anything we need’ and that he has five dependants in Thailand – something we would not been able to afford in Sweden. Similarly, Anna from Switzerland says:

This is a pleasant side effect [of having moved to Chiang Mai] that one can live so conveniently here. I can afford luxuries here, that I could never afford in Switzerland. [...] When I came here, [the owner of the retirement village she lives in] said to me, ‘You do not need a washing machine here. You have a maid!’ to which I said: ‘What, I do not need a maid!’ and she said ‘Sure, fine’. Then at first I had one [maid] for half a day and then I saw how much work the garden needed and all that. Then I wanted a whole day. I enjoy having a maid terribly much! (Anna, 2014)

Anna, who at first did not see the value of having a maid because she thought it would be too expensive, has with time grown accustomed to having someone tending her house and garden daily and she now truly enjoys this luxury.

To justify their obvious privilege in relation to the Thais they meet in their everyday, the respondents say that they are aware of the economic injustices that benefit them, but they are unable to do anything about them. Anna, in describing her life in Thailand, draws an explicit parallel to colonialism:

But, of course, I also realise how we are in a way, despite everything, behaving like colonials! As we have learned in the school books once: how the colonial masters were looking after their servants. (Anna, 2014)

Drawing a parallel to colonialism and the master/servant relations of the time does not stop her from reaping the benefits of these structural inequalities and enjoying having people who can service her house and garden. To further justify their privilege in relation to Thais, the respondents refer to imaginaries about Thai people as accepting of inequalities:

Interviewer: there is a considerable economic difference between you and others [Thai] who work [in the village]...

Tove: yes. But that's not a problem to them. Thais themselves say so, they know that the world is unjust, they know we have more money than they do, and that they can't buy everything they want with their salary while we instead can buy more. But it's nothing they are jealous about. They know that's the way it is. We are not jealous about those who have more than we do, 'Why aren't we as well off?' and so on. No, no there are class differences in society and everywhere in the world, and that's the way it is. (Tove 2017)

In a similar vein, Sam, an American retiree who has lived part-time in Bangkok since the late 1990s, acknowledges that in the early days, he felt uneasy about the economic disparities he witnessed, but he explains Thais' acceptance of economic differences by using a cultural narrative:

Sam: In the beginning, and it was a hangover from my old culture. Um... I have learned that these people, meaning Asians, have been here for centuries and centuries. Longer than the United States of America. And their culture is tried and true and old and ancient and it has worked for them beautifully. I don't want to change that. But, in the beginning I did. 'Oh I don't want to see them so poor. I want to do this for them.'

Interviewer: ...mhm...to do something...

S: I wanna... I love traveling in the buses. I love travelling on the underground, the sky train. Seldom do I take a taxi and I can afford one. The only time I do is when I leave Tops and I've got a couple of bags. Um... I think coming from me, to answer that question of yours, it came from a sense of guilt. I was feeling guilty.

I: Yeah you do.

S: ...and that was quite silly. And this is conjured up in my own head.

I: Mhm....

S: Not ah- they weren't creating that. I was creating the guilt. And I found out it is silly. Tipping and things like that, ah, their culture doesn't call for that. What tipping has done now is brought here by Westerners. We were that sense of guilt. "I've got to give them something for this." But, to their minds, there thinking is "they've already paid for me, for what I do for you. Why would you add more? But that's the way- of coming from my own sense of guilt. It's like going into a department store and buying a shirt and insisting I pay more. Why would you do that? Yes, exactly. (Sam, 2016)

Both Sam and Tove relativize their privilege: Sam describes himself as rather frugal, using public transport when he is in Bangkok, while Tove points out that there are people in the world who are much wealthier than she is. Aware of their financial standing, they talk about their privilege as something they can't do anything about. To fend off any criticism about their comparatively luxurious life, they refer to Thais as good-natured people who accept economic inequalities between them and Western retirees in Thailand. This fits the construction of Thais discussed before as authentic and genuine, uninterested in material possessions. No consideration is given to the toil of Thais working in the service industry and who are often internal migrants from poorer regions in the north-east, and who have family left behind to care for Western retirees.

Maintaining privilege by being a 'good' Westerner

The participants uphold their privilege by portraying themselves as 'good' Westerners in relation to other Western migrants in Thailand. They argue that they are respectful of the staff working for them and of Thai culture, unlike others who exploit Thais and behave inconsiderately. For instance, Anna Karin, who lives in Ban Thale half of the year, shows her appreciation to the Thai staff looking after her property by giving them the "thumb up" regularly. Tove, who lives permanently in Ban Thale, boasts about her good relationship with Thais in the village:

I have asked a [Western] woman who has a business here 'Can you tell me what they [Thais] think of me? I want to know' and she said 'You are so well integrated in the village, they really like you because you are always smiling, always polite, you dress well, your behaviour is spot on and you speak a little bit of Thai. You are a Thai'. That was the nicest compliment.... you're not a *farang*, you're Thai... isn't it? (Tove 2017)

Tove underlines her righteousness by claiming that her daily engagement with Thais has made her more aware about Thai culture and customs, despite not having any close friendships with Thais.

The participants' identity as good Westerner is strengthened by references to Western tourists and residents who behave in openly racist ways. By comparing other Westerners' unacceptable behaviour to what they claim is their own social progressivism and cultural openness, the

participants validate their privileged social position in Thai society. Anna Karin's story is illustrative in this respect. Together with her Swedish partner, she has lived in Ban Thale for at least seven months of the year since 2007. Together, they own two houses in one of the village's gated communities and she is actively engaged in local Scandinavian community. For almost 10 years, Anna Karin and her partner have sponsored two orphaned Thai siblings from Ban Thale. The children live with them at the weekends and during the holidays while Anna Karin and her partner are in Ban Thale and they spend the rest of the year with their grandparents who own a farm at the village's outskirts. Anna Karin recounts some neighbours' reaction when the children were swimming in the shared pool in the gated community she lives in:

AK: Well, in truth, here [in her gated community], like in many other areas, there are residents who cannot stand Thais.

Interviewer: can you tell me more about it?

AK: yes, for example when we were with our [sic!] children and we were teaching them to swim. And we all had a shower before going in the pool, like everyone does, and when we went in the pool one of the ladies who was sunbathing got up. I said, half joking 'Are you leaving?' and she said, 'I can't stay here now!'. And her husband has the same attitude and we [Anna Karin and her husband] don't think that these people should be here at all. (Anna Karin, 2017)

By pointing out the openly racist behaviour of their neighbours, who left the pool because two Thai children were using it, Anna Karin depicts herself positively as engaged in the local community and helping two orphaned children.

The studies' male participants are eager to justify their privileged position as 'good' Westerners by distancing themselves from Westerners who exploit the Thai sex industry. For example, Ole came to Thailand to "begin a new life" and was an avid bar visitor in the early months. However, he would only drink tea and Coca-Cola, to the apparent frustration of the bar girls and their matrons.

Ole: You know, most [Western men] who come here [to Thailand] just want to sit in bars. I know of so many Scandinavians – actually, people from all over the world really - who come here and sit in a bar and drink 20, 30, 40 beers in a day and then go home and sleep the whole day and when they go up, they go to the bar again. They spend most of their life in bars, often the same one. I said that they won't find me in a bar, ever.

Interviewer: Why do you think they do this? It doesn't sound like a happy life...

Ole: to them it is. They come here to get drunk and alcohol here is so cheap, you know. But I came here to begin a new life, so... and then Pattaya, that's where many go to. That's because there are girls and alcohol and all that they think they might wish for, but that's not the real Thailand, it's a fake. (Ole, 2016)

Even though Ole was buying sex, he was doing so in a better way than the 'bad' Westerners, with no alcohol or drugs involved and with the aim to find a Thai "girl" who he could marry and take out of poverty. Similarly, Julian, who lives in a retirement resort in Chiang Mai, compares Westerners like him to those who travel and live in Pattaya:

I think there is a huge difference [between Chiang Mai and Pattaya]. A Swede was here, he actually lives in Pattaya. [...] He has already seen quite a few resorts and he told me how things are in the South. Pattaya is, of course, a real, well, place for sex tourism. Also...yes... A place to get lost. There are many people who book a flight to Pattaya, go there in the red-light district and then fly back home. (Julian, 2014)

Unlike those who visit or live in Pattaya mainly for the easy access to prostitution, Julian describes himself as having 'good relationships with Thais' and trying to 'understand the [Thai] culture'. He goes on to say:

I really try to integrate. I don't want to live isolated, in a resort where only Swiss live or something. Then they talk silly about the Thai people. You have to live as they [Thais] live. [...] there are always a lot of clichés about men going to Thailand. I try to fight them. (Julian, 2014)

Ole and Julian draw a clear boundary between themselves and the Western tourists who are only after cheap drinks and sexual adventures with no strings attached. They see themselves instead as understanding and being well integrated in the community they live in. They describe themselves as gentle, ethical, and innocent, even if they are part and parcel of the sex and retirement industries that are often built on exploitative social and economic structures. They argue that their presence creates employment opportunities for the local population in the service and care sectors. If engaging in the sex industry, the 'good' Westerners are the route out of poverty that can transform Thai women's lives away from allegedly exploitative Thai families or drunken and violent Thai husbands, as expressed by Ole during the interview.

Maintaining privilege and 'improving' Thais

To maintain their privilege, the participants resort to imaginaries of Thais as not only exotic, docile and generous, but also as inferior and in need of improvement. Thus, participants often describe Thais as money-grabbing and untrustworthy:

It's difficult to have a friendship with a Thai because they are so reserved, and then you always have to think why. Why do they want to become your friend? Many times, they are after money and so... [...] Once they [Thai staff servicing Tove's house] wanted us to pay for some clothes to go to a party. And they [the Swedish couple who manages the service of the compound where Tove's house is located] said "No! You've fallen for it!" "So what? It's just 500 Bhat" we said. And they "yes but next time...they take a finger and then they nag". (Tove, 2017)

Similarly, Per believes that Westerners in Ban Thale are treated well only superficially: "the respect we get is not about us being elders. It's false respect from those who sell stuff [laughs] money, money, money" (Per, 2017). These depictions of Thais as money grabbing coexist with the understandings of Thais as friendly and laid-back. By positioning Thais as laid-back, the participants infantilise them, depriving them of any significant agency and aspirations. When Thais behave outside of this frame by being entrepreneurial or by explicitly talking about money, they are immediately depicted negatively, as hypocritical and avid. These representations enable retired lifestyle migrants to define themselves as trustworthy, culturally attuned and belonging to a different (superior) class against Thais.

The infantilization of Thais, and the concomitant exercise of the participants' privilege, is very clear in the practices that aim to 'improve' Thais. Anna Karin, for instance, speaks about how she and her partner have educated the two Thai children they sponsor:

We never, absolutely never wanted to turn them into Swedes. What I want is that they know how to behave when they are invited by a *farang*. How to eat with knife and fork and how to thank for dinner and ... yes... generally...and they don't get it at their place, where they live. 'Cause there they don't even eat together, nothing. (Anna Karin, 2017)

To her, the children's grandparents are unable to teach them the most basic etiquette – such as using cutlery. Anna Karin and her husband are therefore important to teach them how to behave in the world of Westerners, which is explicitly characterized as better. In a similar vein Ole claims to have taught the people of the village where he lives how to behave with women:

There is something I have taught Thais, because they didn't know about it before. It is the man who has to carry the shopping bags, it is the man who has to open the door for a lady. Thais didn't know about this before. The lads walked with their hands in their pockets and the woman had to walk behind him carrying stuff like a donkey. But now people in the village have stopped this. They have seen that the *farang* carries the shopping bags and does all the hard work. So they have started to copy me. Yes, I open the door to my wife, I

go ahead and open the door for her. They think it's strange but that's how I think things are done (Ole, 2016)

By presenting their intentions and actions in a positive light, people like Anna Karin and Ole can do no wrong. Like other Westerners engaged in volunteering activities in Thailand such as setting up dog shelters or beach-cleaning teams, they identify local people in need of assistance (e.g. Anna Karin's sponsored children) and situations in local social structures that they deem to be in a situation of disarray (e.g. the unequal gender relations mentioned by Ole). Their privilege embedded in global power inequalities gives them the power to enter new local social structures and to deem them in need of improvement and alignment to Western values and norms. The practices of 'improving' Thai society also strengthen the image of some Westerner as morally good by pitching it against representations of Thai people as passive actors in need of betterment. Their willingness to 'improve' Thais comes with strings attached, however. In talking about the girl she sponsors, who was 17 at the time of the interview, Anna Karin says:

You know, she is getting fidgety... and we have said to her that if she gets pregnant, she can't come here with the baby because there is not room [in our house] for her and the baby. (Anna Karin 2017)

Anna Karin is prepared to cut her support to the girl she sponsors if she becomes pregnant at a young age, something Anna Karin does not find appropriate.

Conclusions

This article has presented how retired lifestyle migrants in Thailand enact and negotiate their privilege in relation to local people. Their search for a better life after retirement and in a new place is made possible by their economic and social privilege. They all lead more luxurious lives than most local people – the direct effect of their relative economic privilege. They are also able to live a good life because they benefit from global racialised hierarchies built on the illusion of their dominance and superiority vis-à-vis the local population. They justify their superiority in relation to Thai people by claiming engagement with Thai people and Thailand. This is done differently by the male and female participants in the study. Most women claim knowledge about what they construct as authentic 'Thainess': a non-materialistic, kind-spirited society which lives by a slow-paced lifestyle following nature's own rhythm. They present themselves as being spiritually connected to Thailand, thus making it their rightful place to be, and consume what they think is Thai culture and religion for their own personal gratification, by tattooing alleged Buddhist symbols, wearing amulets, and displaying Buddha icons in their homes. Many male participants instead enact their privilege by approaching Thailand and its people as a new context where they can be young and virile again. To

justify their dominant attitudes towards Thais, they present themselves as 'good' partners to Thai women, unlike Thai men who are described as abusive or 'bad' Westerners who only exploit Thai women. Like the female participants, they fall back on simplistic ethno-centric tropes of Thailand, its culture and people. They suggest that Thai women are forced into the sex industry by their families, and that they are docile, timid, and subservient partners who expect their (Western) husband to look after the household's finances. Retired lifestyle migrants' consumptions of Thai culture, spirituality, and female Thai bodies are justified with reference to migrants' economic and social contributions to Thai society. Their presence creates opportunities for employment and upward social mobility for Thais, and they can 'improve' Thai society by ensuring it meets (Western, middle-class) values and ways of doing things.

Despite their claims, their understandings of Thai culture and of the real lives of Thai people is highly superficial or simply inaccurate. Their enacted privilege relative to Thai people serves to construct a barrier towards any genuine appreciation of Thai culture and society. The stereotypical imaginaries of Thai culture persistently cast retired lifestyle migrants in a positive light as the 'good' husband looking after his wife and her family, and as 'good' Westerners helping Thais out of poverty and, in some cases, out of prostitution. No consideration is ever given to how they are implicated in constructing and maintaining socioeconomic inequalities in the local society in which they live. They do not want to know of how land and resources in Thailand have been affected by the tourism industry; how Thai culture itself has been turned into a tourist commodity; or how long-term tourism has affected migratory patterns within Thailand and the consequences these have for social relations in the country. On the contrary, they present their privilege as something they cannot do anything about, and that Thais simply accept because of their alleged non-materialistic and compliant nature. To be able to live a better life, free from one's society social norms, while at the same time ignoring how freedom and a good life are found at the expenses of the local population who is directly impacted by the lifestyle and long-term tourism industries, is the ultimate expression of privilege.

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