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# 'Unintended transnationalism': The challenging lives of Thai women who partner Western men

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## Abstract

This article studies a specific form of transnational living that results from Thai–Western cross-border marriage migration: Thai women's experiences of intercultural partnerships with a Western man. The study is explicitly from a Thai female partner's perspective. It unpacks women's experiences and perceptions of living this life from their own accounts. We refer to their experiences and perceptions of living this form of transnational life as *unintended transnationalism*, that is, that living a life defined by dependent gendered intercultural exchanges with a foreign man was a by-product, not an aspiration of her strategy for a better life. Living 'unintended transnationalism' refers to how women negotiate the specific high challenges and sociocultural pressures arising from dependency on a foreign man, who largely decides where, when and how you live. Women face strong acculturation pressures to adapt to their husbands' Western cultural needs, on his terms, even when they share a home in Thailand—a process we define as *imported assimilationism*. The study shows how her experiences of transnational living are importantly shaped by her: access to rights, cultural differences with her partner, and positioning in social space and place in Thailand, over this life journey. It draws from 20 biographical interviews with women in partnerships (between 7 and 30 years) with Westerners, currently resident in Thailand. Overall, we find that living 'unintended transnationalism' is a challenging life, even for women who make significant material gains. It can lead to isolation, dissociation from family, and dissimulation from belonging in Thailand.

## KEYWORDS

acculturation, cross-border marriage migration, Thailand, transnational living, transnational migration

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, Thai women make transnational lives by partnering 'Western' men from Europe, Australia and North America (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Tosakul, 2010; Lapanun, 2019; Statham, 2020a,

2020b; Sunanta, 2020). Most have rural origins. The scale of partnerships is so significant, that 'Marriage to a foreigner has become an imaginable, culturally scripted aspiration and route out of poverty' (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013, p. 370). It has importantly changed women's aspirations for achieving social mobility, transformed social

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structures, gender and family relations in rural regions, while Thai-foreigner couples are increasingly visible in Western cities and Thailand. Thai-Western partnerships are predominantly between Thai women and older men. Today, some partnerships have endured more than a quarter of a century. This article studies the specific form of 'transnational living' that results from Thai-Western cross-border marriage migration, from a Thai female partner's perspective, by unpacking women's experiences and perceptions of living this life over years from their own accounts.

It is important to see the rapid growth of Thai-Western partnerships against the backdrop of deep social, economic and cultural cross-border connections that reproduces transnational dependent exchanges and asymmetric power relations between Thailand and 'the West' (Statham, Scuzzarello, Sunanta, & Trupp, 2020). Notwithstanding some limitations, one relevant insight of Guarnizo's (2003) innovative formulation for 'transnational living' was precisely the need to link personal subjective experiences within the deeper structural socio-economic context of transnational connections that underpin them.<sup>1</sup> The Thai-Western social relationships discussed here are forms of 'transnational living' that produce, and are reproduced by, the specific globalisation processes linked to Thailand's rapid economic development, of which mobility and migration are important drivers. This links them to globalisation processes that are core to influential transnational perspectives on migrants' lives (among many, see e.g., Levitt, 2001). They could not exist without the many (often invisible) cross-border connections that are relatively accessible in contemporary life—affordable long-distance travel, mobile phones, chat apps, internet dating and easy international money transfers—and serve Thailand's massive foreign population of short-stay tourists. At the same time, the growing internal rural to urban female migration that has been core to Thailand's economic boom has produced a generation of women willing to move to support their families back in the village. Meanwhile Western societies have produced significant numbers of older single men, divorced or alienated from their own families. Some men with disposable incomes in later life that go much further in Thailand try to make their 'holiday romances' into more permanent living arrangements.

This study is explicitly from a women's perspective, as the materially dependent, and often subservient partner in the relationship, from the poorer region.<sup>2</sup> It builds on earlier research on how the 'narrative arc' of a Thai-Western partnership evolves over years shaping a woman's life opportunities and well-being (Statham, 2020a, 2020b). Findings showed the type of gendered negotiated exchanges that sustain these relationships are defined by highly asymmetric power relations, where a woman has to invest by supplying intimate (sex and care) services to her partner in exchange for material support. She has to 'perform' to cater to his intimacy needs, defined by him on his terms, providing 'love', romance, sexual prestige, status among male peers, companionship or eldercare services, often starting out from a position of acute material need and dependency. Such gendered negotiated exchanges constitute new forms of *transnational patriarchy*, where a woman submits to a man in particular with regard to rights over her reproductive capacity and sexuality, and more

generally his authority, in exchange for protection, subsistence, goods, material wealth or other resources (Jongwilaivan & Thompson, 2013).

Living a life defined by cross-border connections, mobility and dependent gendered (material, sociocultural and intimate) exchanges with a foreigner was seldom a woman's aspiration at the outset. It is largely an unintended by-product of her initial strategy to secure a better life by marrying a wealthy Westerner. Women often experience the challenges of their transnational living over time as unintended outcomes of a decision made years ago. I call this living *unintended transnationalism*. Their decisions to marry Westerners were 'choices' only in a very limited sense, because they were decisions made within the strong structural constraints and social and family pressures that confront rural women, who typically face hardships, divorce or life crises. Of course, living in another country or becoming transnational in outlook can be 'unintended' in a straightforward sense. However, by living 'unintended transnationalism', we refer to how women try to cope and negotiate the specific challenging life experiences and sociocultural pressures that arise from living in dependency on a foreign man, from another culture and religion. He largely decides where, when and how you live. Also women face strong acculturation pressures to adapt to their husbands' Western cultural needs, on his terms, even when they share a home in Thailand—a process we define as *imported assimilationism*. The radical transformations women experience on this life journey is beyond anything that could have been imagined or predicted beforehand (Statham, 2020a). Many did not set out to become what Keyes (2014) calls 'village cosmopolitans': people who retain an attachment to their rural home, but whose worldviews have been significantly shaped by experiences beyond the village, often by emigration or mixing with foreigners.

Living this 'unintended transnationalism' can be a source of significant existential psychological stressors that accumulate over years. It can be a difficult life. She faces important challenges: to her sense of individual identity and belonging; to her well-being, as she lives in intimate proximity in a dependent relationship on an (older) foreign man from a different culture; to her emotional bonds and relations to her natal family; and to her status and place 'fitting in' Thai society. At the same time, she faces very high contextual barriers, and material and social costs, if she wants to 'exit'. This places strong social pressures on her to make this new life work for her husband, her natal family and finally for her. In contrast to a normative bias that was present especially in early transnational perspectives (e.g., Levitt, 2001) emphasising the relative ease of living 'here' and 'there', we look at how women experience the unexpected costs and benefits of this challenging transnationalised life journey.

Waldinger (2017) argues that many contributions on transnationalism have a normative bias and overemphasise transnational social connectivity over the political restrictions that states place on mobility and noncitizens, and that this leads them to overstate the apparent ease for migrants of coping with living 'here' and 'there'. For example, Levitt's (2001, pp. 8–9) seminal definition sees a *transnational social field* as a 'border-spanning arena that enables migrants, if they choose, to remain active in both worlds'. Leaving aside general theoretical

disputes, I consider that opportunities for transnational living are highly context dependent. Specific cases will be importantly shaped by the interaction of receiving states' restrictions on mobility and stratification of life chances for noncitizens, on one side, and migrants' capacity for transnational social agency through cross-border connections, on the other. For Thai female marriage migrants, who are resource weak and highly dependent, face high barriers in moving and postmigration living abroad, and difficulties of 'imported assimilationism' when setting up home with a Westerner in Thailand, we expect transnational living to be very socially and culturally challenging both 'here' and 'there'.

The original data is from 20 biographical semistructured interviews with women in partnerships with Westerners, for between seven and 30 years (mean 13.7 years). Today, these women reside with their partners permanently, or most of the year, in Thailand. This is because one aim of the study is to examine the impact of transnational living on her status, relations and place in Thai society. Nonetheless, the sample includes women who lived many years abroad, who move backwards and forwards within a year, who plan to emigrate abroad imminently and a few who never left.

The next section outlines a perspective on transnational living resulting from cross-border marriage, by presenting an analytic framework for studying the women's experiences by their access to rights, cultural differences, and location in social space and place. After discussing methods and the sample, subsequent sections present the empirical study: opportunities for transnational living; 'imported assimilation' in personal relations; and remaking 'home' in Thailand. The final discussion re-evaluates living 'unintended transnationalism' by examining how rights, home life with a foreigner, and family and social relations, importantly shape her individual life experiences, well-being and 'where' and 'how' she fits into Thai society after this journey.

## 2 | TRANSNATIONAL LIVING AFTER CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE

Cross-border marriages are forms of transnational living that connect people through mobility across nation-state borders and produce new intercultural and interethnic familial relations. Such transnational living is deeply inscribed by the social conditions of global inequality and gender relations that produce them (Fresnoza-Flot, 2017). Constable's (2005, 2009) general perspective is influential. She draws from feminist insights on 'gendered geographies of power' (Mahler & Pessar, 2001) to define cross-border marriages as 'global marriage-scapes'. She argues that the global intersections of gender, class, ethnic and national inequalities lead to individual aspirations that produce migration flows between people from richer and poorer countries who marry (Constable, 2005, p. 5). Like many, she moves away from explanations of economic motivations, to emphasise intimacy, emotions and culture, as reasons why individuals move and marry: 'Recent marriage-scapes both reflect and are propelled by fantasies and imaginings about gender, sexuality, tradition, and modernity' (Constable, 2005, p. 7). Nonetheless, she emphasises the

'commodification' of intimacy and caregiving by women in marital and family relations (Constable, 2009). In similar frameworks, a large number of case studies exist on transnational partnerships resulting from cross-border marriage.<sup>3</sup> Typically, these examine the gendered material, intimate and care exchanges between individual women and men in a partnership, in relation to, first, the intersecting inequalities and asymmetric power relations in which they are socially embedded, and second, the *lived experiences*, emotions, well-being and socio-economic outcomes (e.g., 'hypergamy') for a female partner from a poorer country.

This contribution advances three factors within a Thai woman's gendered negotiated exchanges with a Western man that shape transnational living experiences and outcomes: rights, cultural difference and social space and place.

First, in a world dominated by restrictive state immigration and citizenship regimes, it is important to account for the limiting effects of receiving states on mobilities, migration pathways and postmigration life chances (Statham et al., 2020; Waldinger, 2017). Restrictions are very high for people from the Global South. This is especially clear for Thai wives moving West, who have to prove the 'validity' of their marriage to enter in the first place. But it applies to Westerners who try to live (semi-)permanently in Thailand, confronted by the Thai state's restrictions on foreigners. Many Thai-Western social relationships seemingly occur 'bottom-up', outside the domain of state authority, as a result of individual decisions. This viewpoint is reinforced by marriage migration perspectives, especially Constable's (2005), that focus on individual personal stories. Discussions of rights granted by sending and receiving states are surprisingly absent from many cross-border marriage studies on Thailand (e.g., Lapanun, 2019) and Asia (for a rare early exception, see Piper & Roces, 2003). Such approaches fail to acknowledge sufficiently how states shape the social and political conditions that facilitate/hinder mobility for each partner, and their life chances as foreign emigrants abroad, or partners of foreign immigrants in Thailand. If two individuals from different parts of the globe meet by internet dating, or casual sexual encounters in 'holiday romances', there appears to be no state intervention. After all, liberal states do not tell people with whom they can have intimate relations or marry. However, as soon as people try to live in the same place and settle together, it is clear that opportunities for transnational living are strongly determined by the *access to rights*—immigration and long-term settlement requirements—that receiving states place on a foreign spouse. How receiving states grant rights to entry, residence, property and access to social welfare matters a great deal for the life chances, security and well-being for Thais in the West and Westerners in Thailand.

A second factor that importantly shapes a Thai woman's transnational living experiences derives from her strong *cultural differences* from her partner. Notwithstanding Thailand's globalisation, very strong differences remain between Thai and Western cultures on core norms and values, gender relations, religion, family obligations, sexual mores and relations between individuals and community (Van Esterik, 2000). In Thai-Western intercultural marriages these cultural differences are negotiated within interpersonal

exchanges that are defined by power asymmetry and her dependence on him. They define life together at 'home'. Unlike immigrants to the West, most Western immigrant 'expatriates' feel little need to 'acculturate' towards Thailand and face few pressures to do so, living in tourist locations designed to cater for their needs as a foreign sojourner (Scuzzarello, 2020). While 'acculturation' and 'cultural assimilation' usually refers to how migrants from poorer countries adapt to the culture and values of so-called 'mainstream' majority populations in their societies of settlement (see especially, the influential work of Alba and colleagues, e.g., Alba et al., 2018; Alba & Nee, 2003), Thai women face strong pressures to 'acculturate' to Western values when they live with Westerners in Thailand, because of his dominant position in the partnership. Living this *imported assimilationism* on a daily basis at 'home', performing for a man on his terms, in his language, in his social setting, cooking and eating his food, can present significant challenges to individual identity and belonging leading to feelings of isolation. Western husbands are often transitioning sex tourists (Lafferty & Maher, 2020; Thompson, Kitiarsa, & Smutkupt, 2016). Whether sharing a home abroad, or in Thailand, Thai women can face 'neo-colonial' Western male imaginaries of superiority, that is, that they are hyperfeminine, exotic, sexually submissive, docile and willing to provide intimate and care services. Such discriminatory stereotypes operate as 'social facts' shaping how Westerners (including husbands) treat them. At the same time, her cultural engagement with a 'Western' way of life can lead to less acceptance by Thais and a relative estrangement from her homeland.

A third factor that shapes transnational living is her belonging to and location in *social space and place*. This is where her life journey after marriage leaves her in relation to, first, her social relationships with Thai 'significant others', especially family and friends, and second, her status in Thai society and the 'place' she is located. Here, we draw insights from 'linked-lives' perspectives on how individual relationships within a family, and the role of 'significant others' from extended family kinship networks (e.g., Kou, Mulder, & Bailey, 2017), shape decisions. Also pertinent are perspectives on 'home' and family that identify the social imaginary and emotional, as well as material and resource-based aspects of a migrant's 'home' experiences (e.g., Boccagni, 2017). As 'dutiful daughters', Thai women face strong social pressures and cultural obligations of familial piety to support parents and family located in the rural 'home' (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009). These were often primary motivations to marry a foreigner. Once married, however, her social relationships with her natal family are transformed as she has to mediate between providing for her natal family and the demands of her partner (usually the source of provision). Where does this leave her status in the family, and natal rural village, to which many Thai emigrants still identify strongly as their emotional 'home' (Rigg, 2019; Turner & Michaud, 2020)? Women who partner Westerners face strong stigmatisation in Thailand as 'prostitutes' that can make it hard to fit back into society, or gain upward social mobility, even if they become materially wealthy. This social and emotional distance from natal family and Thai social relations can be reinforced by living in a home that is physically located in city that caters for the 'expat' community. Does intercultural marriage increase

her sociocultural distance and lead to segregation from Thai society? Who does she socialise with in this life journey? How does she belong to her family, village and home country? She potentially ends up being neither 'here' nor 'there', but stuck somewhere in between.

In summary, this analytic framework studies three factors that shape her transnational living experiences and social and well-being outcomes:

1. *Opportunities for transnational living*: How decisions to marry, move and live with a foreigner are strongly shaped by *access to rights* that derive from one's own and a partner's nation-state
2. *Imported assimilationism in personal relations*: How *cultural differences* between partners are negotiated in everyday living together
3. *Remaking 'home' in Thailand*: How she belongs, socially fits into, and is re-located in Thailand by this life-journey (*social space and place*)

### 3 | METHOD AND SAMPLE

The original data are from 20 in-depth biographical interviews with Thai women (Table 1) selected from a larger sample of 40 interviews. We include only women in partnerships for at least 7 years, because this allows sufficient time for 'transnational living'. Our interviewees reside in Thailand, at least for most of the year. They were recruited from two rural regions notable for Thai-Western partnerships, Udon Thani (11) and Phetchabun (5), while a few are from the tourist city Pattaya (2), and capital Bangkok (2), to add urban variation. All interviews were conducted between August 2016 and November 2017 by experienced Thai researchers, in Thai language, on location in Thailand. The interviews lasted at least one hour, some much longer. They were recorded, transcribed and professionally translated into English.

Interviews were open but semistructured in a way that encouraged respondents to recount key events in their life histories, through which they interpreted and evaluated their partnership. To analyse the interview material, first, we read the full transcripts several times. From this we reconstructed a framework for studying 'transnational living' by looking at the negotiated exchanges between the couple in setting up home (rights), relations at home (cultural differences) and remaking home in Thailand (social space and place). We then coded the interviews by identifying these three aspects. This allowed us to work with the qualitative material on how a woman frames and evaluates her experiences of 'transnational living'. We were also able to compare the range of different experiences between respondents within each aspect of 'transnational living'. In this way, we are able to present our qualitative findings and quotes within an overall interpretive framework.

Table 1 summarises the sample. Age differences are significant. Typically, a woman started a partnership in her early 30s with a 15 years older Westerner, who at the time was about 50 years old. Half are divorced from Thai husbands and have children from their first marriage. Their partnerships with foreigners have lasted between 7 (minimum requirement for inclusion) and 30 years (mean 13.7 years). All except two cases have resulted in formal marriage. Today,

**TABLE 1** Sample of Thai women

Woman code	Current location	Her age	Her highest educational level	Divorced from Thai man?	Children from Thai marriage	Years with Westerner	Registered marriage with Westerner?	Age gap to Western man	Children with Western man	Partner's age	Partner's nationality
A.	Phetchabun	46	Primary school	Yes	2	12	Yes	22	0	68	Swiss
B.	Udon Thani	47	Vocational college	No	N/A	15	Yes	16	1	63	German
C.	Phetchabun	56	4th grade school	Yes	3	25	Yes	25	0	71 <sup>c</sup>	British (English)
D.	Udon Thani	36	9th grade school	No	N/A	17	No	12	2	48	Austrian
E.	Udon Thani	37	University	No	N/A	12	Yes	20	0	57	British (Scottish)
F.	Udon Thani	53	University	Yes	2	15	Yes	15	0	68	American (US)
G.	Udon Thani	53	University	Yes	2	17	Yes	13	0	66	German
H.	Udon Thani	52	University	Yes, twice	3 (2 + 1)	12	Yes	10	0	62	American (US)
I.	Udon Thani	37	6th grade school	Yes	2	10	Yes	30	0	67	American (US)
J.	Phetchabun	60	Vocational college	Yes	2	16	Yes	18	0	78	Finnish
K.	Phetchabun	42	University	Yes	4	7	Yes	3	0	45	Dutch
L.	Udon Thani	55	Secondary school	Yes	1	15	Yes	10	0	65	Belgian
M.	Bangkok	32	University	No	N/A	7	Yes	13	0	45	Slovakian
N.	Bangkok	52	University	No	N/A	30	Yes	20	0	72	Dutch
O.	Phetchabun	50	University	No	N/A	10	No	13	0	63	Australian
P.	Udon Thani	34	University	No	N/A	8	Yes	28	2	62	Swedish
Q.	Udon Thani	59	University	Yes, twice <sup>a</sup>	2	14	Yes	15	0	74	German
R.	Udon Thani	57	University	No	0 <sup>b</sup>	16	Yes	15	0	72	German
S.	Pattaya	45	Grade 6 school	No	1	7	Yes	16	0	61	Norwegian
T.	Pattaya	50	Grade 6 school	No	0	9	Yes	-3	0	47	British
	Means	47.7	-	-	-	13.7	-	15.6	-	62.7	-

<sup>a</sup>Married and divorced same man twice.

<sup>b</sup>Cares for nephew who has lived with her since a baby.

<sup>c</sup>Died aged 71.

the ages of their men range between 45 and 78 (mean 62.7), with one deceased, which underlines the significance of ageing. Although official statistics have limitations as partnerships may not be formally registered, examination of available data indicates our sample fits a general pattern.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding social status and background, half the women are educated to university level. This contradicts popular stereotypes that the women are destitute peasants turned 'bar girls' or prostitutes. There are such cases, but several women held lower middle-class public sector jobs, as teachers and hospital officials, but faced 'blocked' opportunities for social advancement. This underlines that marrying a foreigner as a strategy for a better life is open to women from rural regions with a wide range of social backgrounds.

## 4 | CHALLENGES OF TRANSNATIONAL LIVING

### 4.1 | Opportunities for transnational living: Access to rights

Access to rights from receiving and sending states matter a great deal in shaping how each partner decides to proceed in a partnership. After establishing personal relations and maintaining them socially across borders, through email, internet, chat apps and serial 'holiday' encounters, the couple may decide that they wish to advance their negotiated exchanges and decide to live together in a shared home. This is when the strong restrictions on access to rights that accrue from each other's nation-state kicks in.

One restrictive barrier to transnational living for Thai–Western couples is on actually being able to move around internationally, set up home and reside permanently together. Restrictive immigration, visa and residence requirements in Thailand for foreigners, but especially in Western states for Thais, means that couples need to legally 'marry' to move around and live together over sustained periods of time. Western states also place conditions on recognising legal marriages to foreigners from the Global South as 'genuine'.

Legal marriage is a game changer, because it not only makes possible the mobility and settlement that facilitates transnational living together, but it simultaneously increases the relative access of each individual to the property, social and health rights that derive from the other partner's national citizenship status. This makes the decision to move, marry and live together an almost 'all or nothing' package of interdependent rights, that bind a couple together, legally, socially and physically in place, from one day to another, much more so than for decisions between co-nationals in the same country. As a result, a couple's decision to 'marry' is less a free choice based on personal intentions or 'love' but more a requirement placed on them by restrictive state immigration and citizenship policies.

Through marriage, women gain access to rights that provide at least some degree of material resources, security and potential empowerment. A woman whose marriage is recognised by a Western state gains rights for international mobility, work and residence

abroad and, as a spouse, potentially access to long-term social welfare, pension, inheritance and health rights. If she naturalises to a Western state, she gains access to full citizenship, welfare and protections that hold if she divorces or resides in Thailand. In addition, this increase in status and recognition by a foreign state can allow women who bring their children into a relationship, to move with their children, and sometimes children gain individual access to full citizenship rights through naturalisation. In this way, a woman achieves better life opportunities that can be transferred on to children.

For Westerners in Thailand, the main issue regards access to property ownership rights. Foreigners are not allowed to own land in Thailand by law. Apartments can be purchased by foreigners as long as at least 51% of the building is Thai owned. Effectively, this means that Western men usually purchase or build a house in cooperation with their spouse, by putting up all the capital and using the spouse's family name. In this case, she is a legal owner of the property, and he has to trust her not to take possession or sell it. In this way, the decision to buy a house and live together in Thailand, actually transfers material resources to her. However, it is not a one-way street. He could not build a meaningful foothold in Thailand through ownership of property, or set up a business, without cooperation with a Thai national. There are also other potential gains, such as access to a 1-year marriage visa, and in some cases the Thai health system, but these are relatively marginal gains and matter mostly only for relatively poor Westerners.

A teacher who lives modestly sharing costs with a retired Finnish bus driver on a low pension recounts how marriage and formally living in Thailand allows him to pay less tax and gain access to healthcare:

He moved his residency to Thailand because he didn't want to pay high tax in Finland ... If he owns a house in Finland, he pays 35% tax instead of 10% that he is paying now ... He knows he can reimburse his medical bill ... from my social security as a city employee.

*Interviewer:* Your spouse is covered from your employer too?

Yes, he is ... but he rarely uses it. Mostly he goes to private hospital on his pocket ... (J)

Unsurprisingly, formal marriage is a primary objective for most women. However, the initial decision to marry is almost always decided by him, on his terms, to fit with his life-course stage, underpinned by his economic power. If he is still working, this may require her emigrating, immediately, usually leaving her children and family behind. If he plans to retire and live permanently, or most of the year, in Thailand, he may decide to rent a property or build a house for them there. If he works in Thailand, either remotely 'online', or supplying tourist services to other Westerners, then he may wish to establish home in a location popular with 'expats'. The material dependency of a woman means that she has to adapt her life, instantaneously, to fit a context set by his demands. This asymmetry of power in their relations shapes the 'when' and 'where' of mobilities and exchanges that shape their transnational living.

Transnational living requires that a couple works together to overcome the significant administrative barriers in his and her homeland, where they each have respective social capital resources of language, know-how and contacts, to achieve the practical objectives. As the primary source of assets in a union, the man often addresses the 'all or nothing' nature of the marriage decision by putting conditions in place. Indeed, negotiations over marriage are often explicit about the forms of exchanges, including conditions, now and in the future, that are legally underwritten.

I must be married to him for 5 years before I can get a pension. His pension is about 30,000 Baht per month, it's not that much because I live in Thailand, not in his country. I also get this house because it's under my name. Everything in Thailand will be mine. I don't have to split it with his children. The money in his saving account will be split in half—for his children and me. (S)

Before getting a marriage certificate, he added the necessary conditions ... all assets in the US will belong to my husband and all assets in Thailand will belong to me—under my name ... to protect us both from any problems in the future ... When he dies his daughter won't have any problem with his assets ... I will have the rights to all assets in Thailand ... He submitted this agreement ... to the consulate for certification. This was one of the most important things we agreed on. (F)

In addition, to financial exchanges, a woman's care support, intimacy and fidelity is often 'commodified' in agreements informally, and even formally:

If I had a new boyfriend after we got married, he had full rights to determine an amount of alimony. This was protection, in case a Thai woman deceives a foreigner. (F)

Of course, formal rights are only empowering, if they can be actually realised. Sometimes rights are difficult for a woman to enforce, if, for example, it would require taking a claim to court in her partner's homeland, or in cases of death, when his family fail to acknowledge or 'lose' his testament.

## 4.2 | 'Imported assimilationism' in personal relations: Cultural differences at home

Here, we examine how she negotiates the cultural boundaries of national, ethnic, racial and religious differences in her social relations with her partner, by communication (e.g., language), adapting her values and reconstructing her identity. How do negotiated exchanges and power relations between individuals from very different countries, cultures and religions become manifest in mundane domestic

everyday life? How do they culturally interact (e.g., language and food), negotiate their different values and adapt their social relations, with one another, so that they can share a home?

The act of sharing a home sets in motion radical life transformations for both partners and brings new challenges. It transforms the negotiated exchanges and intimacy that define their interpersonal relations. Initially, the transformation of an 'extended holiday romance' relationship, where intimate provision (sexual, emotional and care) by her was exchanged for material goods from him, into everyday living together, is experienced as a significant 'shock'. The reality of making a 'home' brings out their deep cultural differences, language difficulties, diverse food tastes, gender norms and different expectations over relations with her family. In short, it exposes to a significant degree that they are 'strangers', aliens from different cultures, and their respective roles performed in getting together cannot be sustained in everyday life. At the point when their partnership becomes socially embedded in a 'home', family and locality, and legally underpinned, there is greater potential for conflict in their interpersonal relations, because they are both experiencing significant individual life changes, but with higher stakes, and fewer exit options. Resultant frustrations and difficulties in their personal relations in the home, often become expressed as 'cultural differences' between Thailand and the West.

For a woman, making home in Thailand with a Westerner is living a form of *imported assimilationism*. From the outset, her life is structured around catering for his intimate, care, and social needs, defined by him, for him, on his values and terms. His dominant power in their negotiated exchanges usually leads him to impose his Western values on their social relations. At worst, men can assert the 'superiority' of selective patriarchal, neo-colonial and sometimes racist versions of 'Western values' that are dismissive of Thai-ness and women, while at best, even sensitive men often lack understanding for Thai culture. Although Thai women may buy into the modernity and individualist consumerism of Western values to some degree, they also live embedded in a Thai Buddhist national culture shaped by strong familial piety obligations, especially for women, which pulls in an opposite direction. This leads to significant 'culture clashes' and personal conflicts in the home.

A 53-year-old woman in a 15-year partnership with a 68-year-old American recounts:

We grew up differently and met when we were already old... He grew up in his culture ... he has certain ideas regarding certain issues. But if I bring those up ... it's too much and annoys him ... the way of thinking, culture and how we communicate are different ... Cultural differences affect everything we do ... There are so many things in Thailand which they don't do in the US. I have to remind my husband that this is how things are done in Thailand. These are the first things we often argue about. (F)

Likewise, when asked about negative things of living with her Belgian husband after 15 years, another states:

It is difficult to clearly understand their thoughts.

*Interviewer:* You mean it is the language problem.

No, we can communicate but sometimes our opinions are different based on our cultures ... It is about our lifestyles or small details of life. (L)

Repeating stereotypes that Thai women are supposedly 'submissive' and 'good carers' (Sunanta, 2020), she contrasts Thai reservedness to Western individualistic assertiveness:

Thai women always say 'Yes Yes' to anything, so foreigners like us ... we are good at taking care and always say 'Yes' ... We are afraid to express our true feeling which is unlike American or European people who are confident in expressing their feeling. (L)

Even an emotionally satisfied and financially secure woman highlights cultural misunderstandings with her Scottish husband, after 12 years together:

*Interviewer:* Is there anything you feel uncomfortable about?

He doesn't understand much about the culture ... if I want to go to grandmother's house or to the temple, he will ask 'why are you going?' I would tell him it's the tradition thing that I must go but then he would tell that he would not be coming along. (E)

A lack of basic communication sometimes reinforces separation between a couple in the home. A woman who lives very modestly with her husband expresses frustration at his lack of provision that is compounded by their inability to communicate:

Sometimes I get mad too when he doesn't let me have what I ask for.

*Interviewer:* You have lived with him for ten years ...

How did you learn how to speak Finnish?

He gave me a book to practice.

*Interviewer:* So you were using a translation book with him. What about now, can you speak in sentences?

No, not in sentences...

*Interviewer:* So he understands some words in Thai.

Common words like eat, bath, where are you going, I am fine, I love you. He said I love you very clearly.

*Interviewer:* Does he say it to you every day.

No, but it was his first Thai sentence he could speak. (J)

For others, limited communication simply expresses that their personal relations are functional, lacking emotional intimacy and warmth. A woman describes living with her British partner:

*Interviewer:* How is your daily communication?

We just ask what we want to have for lunch or dinner.

*Interviewer:* Over 9 years—your life has been like that?

My friends also ask how I've spent my life with him just like that. We've never had a big argument even we spend almost 24 hours together every day. We don't have a small talk like other couples. (T)

While some problems are cultural misunderstandings, others are gendered, when men assert their own patriarchal norms and values to exert their dominant power in the relationship at home. Differences in food tastes were common, with men often not accepting Thai cuisine and eating only Western food. However, the following case demonstrates how a man exerts his authority over food choices as part of his entitlement over her body and social control over her behaviour. A woman has internalised the complaints of her American husband and sees herself as unable to eat her own regional food in her own country:

He cannot adapt himself to eat many Thai foods, especially Isan foods ... I cannot eat Som-tam because my body will smell after eating. One time I forgot that I ate spicy food and kissed him after eating. He complained that my lips were spicy. I have to select what I eat. (F)

A couple's ability to sustain a relationship over the long-term depends on whether they can adapt their respective roles and exchanges to fit the changed circumstances. This requires a transformation of intimacy between them that acknowledges a woman's enhanced status in the partnership. Some men find this difficult, not least because the decision to live together was usually motivated by his self-interest or retirement plan, and strongly shaped by his patriarchal understandings.

One woman feels sufficiently empowered to take her Slovakian husband to a counsellor, after domestic conflicts resulting from his refusal to do housework. She challenges his assertion of patriarchal norms that he attributed to Thai-Western partnerships, that it is 'normal' for Thai women to 'serve' their husbands, a 'commodified' service he has paid for:

We had to see a doctor to help us understanding each other. Since I feel that I do everything in the house while he does nothing, except sleeping and paying ... I was told that he thought that he is the one who pays and he has seen from other Thai and foreign couples that foreigners do not have to do housework. (M)

Another factor in cases of significant age gaps is *differential ageing* (Statham, 2020a) that can lead to his increasing dependency on her for care due to ageing, infirmity and ill health. A husband's ill health can rupture living arrangements negotiated at marriage. A woman recounts her difficulties coping with the extra dependency of her 61-year-old Norwegian after his stroke:

It's more like pressure. Sometimes I need to be much more patient than before. But, if I can't handle something, I go into the bathroom and shout out loud. (S)

### 4.3 | Remaking 'home' in Thailand: Social space and place

Women from rural Thailand face strong cultural expectations to be 'dutiful daughters' who provide for their parents and extended families (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009). Also, half the women in our sample had children to support from a previous marriage. Natal family obligations are a primary reason why women decide for a Western partner. Once married and living with him in Thailand, her efforts to negotiate with him as a source of material support, and her family's expectations for material and emotional provision, importantly shapes her individual well-being, social relations and place in Thai society. Crucial is the degree to which he is prepared to accept obligations to her children and parents, that may have been hidden, or whether he follows Western ideas that he has married 'her' as an individual, not 'her family'. Unless he is accommodating, this leads to significant conflicts, between the couple, and between her and her family. Again, conflicts in a couple become expressed over cultural differences:

He didn't understand at the beginning. Thais support and take care of our parents which is different from Westerners ... I asked him to check for information on internet about Thai culture if he doesn't believe me. (T)

He expects me to focus more on our own family, rather than my own Thai family. (P)

He and my children are not good to each other. I used to tease him that I will get them boxing gloves to fight each other. If anyone dies, I will take care of the funeral plan. (This) point I am worried most about. (A)

Although she is in the same country as her family, a woman often lives effectively like a migrant with 'left behind children'. Unless her husband is willing to have her children in the home, they remain with her parents. This creates emotional distance between her and her children. At the same time, she often faces unrealistic pressures and expectations from her family for financial support.

The youngest doesn't respect me enough ... She complained that she felt she didn't have a mother. That gave her a complex. Other students teased her about it. So she doesn't really see me as her mother. She feels abandoned. (A)

(A)I get money because I take care of my old husband. People say I can become a millionaire from money I get from my husband, if I don't spend it on my family ... (My mother) complains I don't do a daughter's job. (I)

Family demands also provide a reason why women remain in partnerships with Westerners:

(O)ther women who need financial support for her family, she may have to think carefully about breaking up ... Not me as I do not have anyone to be supported. I do not need to beg for him to stay. I have only 2 years-old puppies ... they are my only concerns. (O)

In addition to relations with her natal family, a woman often leads on building the social connections between home life with her partner and Thai society. Her 'know-how', language skills and contacts in Thailand—social capital—can increase her relative empowerment in the partnership and his dependency. His dependency is further underlined, in cases of ageing and ill health, and when he fails to adapt to living in a foreign country, or the life changes of retirement. A woman outlines how she takes 'full responsibility' for negotiating the interface between their home and Thai society. She contrasts this to their earlier life in Belgium. She feels the burden of his dependency, due in part to his inability to socialise and adapt to retirement, and the additional work of looking after their affairs:

I take full responsibility. When I was there, after working hours I went back to home to eat and sleep ... Here is different as I am supposed to take care of him such as going to the bank, taking him to see a doctor (as he cannot speak Thai), processing a visa, cycling with him as a hobby, house decoration ... Encouraging him to meet friends is one option to free-up some of my time ... he really wants to stay with me for 24 hours. I told him that I cannot stick to him for all day. (L)

Regarding the place their home is located, this often depends on relations to her natal family. In cases where he accepts (supporting) her family, they will often move to her family's village. For example, a 47-year-old Dutchman adopted a woman's four children and moved to become a schoolteacher in her village. However, this is exceptional; most men are older and retired. If they move to her village, they are expected to provide sufficient finance to build a house and support her family. The houses they build in rural villages are invariably 'Western', with all mod cons. They are sometimes ostentatiously 'Western', towering above local traditional houses, to demonstrate 'success' and wealth, like remittance houses. Men who provide substantially become adopted 'son-in-laws' to her family and participate in village life and ceremonies (Thompson, Kitiarsa, & Smutkupt, 2016). By contrast, other men insist on locating home in resort cities that allows them access to expatriate communities, leaving her distant from her family.

I'm the only child left who still take care of my family (parents) ... I asked him about moving to Burirum to stay at my parents' place. But he refused and said not now, he likes to be in Pattaya city. (T)

Some hybrid developments are emerging in rural regions geared towards providing amenities for communities of Thai-Western couples. These places have shopping malls selling luxury items and

Western bars and restaurants. In short, they provide facilities for this new social category of Thai–Western couples and venues for them to socialise together.

*Interviewer:* Please tell me about how you and your husband meet your friends here?

My husband was the one who set up the group of foreign friends... My husband likes going out as he might get stressed spending time at home with me... Those foreigners' wives have become good friends to me. They are type of true friends we can hang out with and request for any support ... we can call for help when we are ill or we may need a friend to help with translation ... We know each other well and we always help ... Sometimes, we are not good at cooking western food, so my friends help me with this cooking. (A)

This encapsulated existence of socialisation with 'other people like them' strongly indicates how Thai–Western couples stand apart in Thai society. It is also worth noting that socialisation as 'couples' often involves the men and women socialising in separate groups in the same venue. For women, the relative social closure of the group is reinforced by cultural stigmatisation that women who marry foreigners face in Thai culture as 'prostitutes'. This means that a woman lives *in* Thailand but is no longer seen as fully part of Thai society. She may gain relative material wealth and some upward social mobility but remains an object for stigma and envy. She stands apart and is less accepted in status by other Thais. Women from poorer rural backgrounds with lower education seem more willing to embrace the social distance of an encapsulated 'mia Farang' lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. By contrast, higher educated women are more likely to use their partnership as a resource to try in some way to advance their status back into the mainstream of local Thai society. A schoolteacher recounts how she gives patronage to others to re-gain 'status':

People who did not accept or care about me seem to be more open and friendly to me ...

*Interviewer:* You mean they insulted you because you were poor.

Yes, I previously took the public bus ... After marrying my husband, my life has been dramatically changed.

*Interviewer:* You have lots of money to spend.

Yes, I am not stingy and I am generous to others.

*Interviewer:* People now approach you more.

Yes, they view me as a special person, as they called me like Madam. (H)

## 5 | CONCLUSION: LIVING 'UNINTENDED TRANSNATIONALISM'

A first finding is that access to rights from receiving states importantly defines the opportunities for Thai–Western cross-border marriage

and resultant forms of transnational living. Paradoxically, strong borders designed to keep people of different nationalities territorially apart, effectively force Thai–Western couples into marriage and almost instantaneously locate them in a life together, 'here' or 'there'. Formal marriage intertwines their future prospects in a set of legal interdependent arrangements, that become socially embedded, and make 'exit' options materially and practically costly for him, and virtually impossible for her. In short, they are 'stuck with each other'. Their initial decision becomes a 'path dependent' life trajectory for both. Life together becomes a form of negotiated exchanges, often conflictual, about how to make it work. But their negotiations over important life decisions, such as where to live, when to retire, plays out in a framework of opportunities for accessing a set of rights to move, reside, own property, and access social welfare that is specific to partners in a Thai–Western couple. As a result, her opportunities and life choices are radically different to those prior to marriage and from those of her peers without foreign husbands. Effectively she is living a different life, because it is built on a different opportunity structure for rights.

Neither she nor her husband is likely to have anticipated the long-term consequences of marriage. Men risk becoming emotionally trapped in a failed 'holiday romance' in a foreign country over years. By contrast, a woman risks living at an emotional and physical distance from her own family, to provide intimate, care and domestic services for an ageing (and possibly unhappy) Westerner, on whom she depends, but may have little in common other than sharing four walls. This is a challenging and difficult life, even for resourceful individuals, and when material expectations are met.

A second finding is how alienating and isolating it is for a woman sharing a home in relative dependency on a foreign man. She lives an 'imported assimilationism' whereby she is expected to 'acculturate' to his 'Western values' in domestic life, on his terms, underpinned by his power. Over the long term, there can be psychological costs of living as a daily 'performer' to cater for someone else's cultural demands and intimate care needs. Some women seem to experience an almost self-loathing, *alienation* or loss of self in the home. 'Home' is not only a place but a location for emotional investment, and for some living everyday with a foreign man, a cultural alien who remains a stranger, simply underlines the emotional barrenness of their lives. As he ages, unexpected care provision challenges arise. In cases of dementia, a woman's sense of emotional loss in the home is underlined still further. Material gains, the initial motivation, are not enough to compensate for this sense of loss and sociocultural distance from her previous life. Such feelings are compounded by facing pressures to 'acculturate' to his Western patriarchal expectations, while actually living in Thailand.

A possible bridge that remains for a woman to keep continuity with her earlier life, and Thai society, is her natal family. However, many women, including 'success' stories, expressed anxieties due to pressures they face on a daily basis to mediate and manage the high competing demands of their family and Western partner. Most women had domestic conflicts with their husbands due to cultural misunderstandings, especially over her obligations to be a 'dutiful

daughter', or how to include her children in their partnership. These social pressures and emotional uncertainties accumulate, even for resilient and resourceful individuals. In many cases, the life journey of being a foreigner's wife makes women emotionally, socially and sometimes even culturally distant from their families and children, even when they all live in Thailand. Often women expressed frustrations at the material demands and expectations of family members or disappointment their children only aspired to be 'conspicuous consumers'. Although the degree varies, many women experience a *dissociation* from the intimate bonds of family. This presents significant challenges for an individual's identity and psychological security, especially when 'love' for family was a primary reason for starting this life journey.

A third finding is how the life changes of transnational living transform a woman's 'status' and social relations to Thai society. Many women have life-changing experiences; they move and live abroad for several years, speak new languages, wear new clothes, are healthier than Thai peers and live in modern houses. Her life transformation is so radical that it does not relate to the same social categories as her prior life. This experience living 'unintended transnationalism' means that women continue to live at a distance from Thai society and find it hard to fit in. In a sense, their new life and cultural experiences leads to a process of cultural *dissimilation* from Thai social life. They adopt values, tastes, styles and cultural accoutrements that are 'made in Thailand' through their partnerships with aliens but not of Thailand. This leads to estrangement. It is compounded by the stigmatisation of being a foreigner's wife in Thai culture that makes it hard even for materially successful women to enter higher echelons of society. A woman almost becomes a foreigner or a member of new social group in her native country. Their lives are akin to being 'immigrants in their own country' and similar to experiences of 'return migrants', even though some have never lived abroad. One reason 'Thai wives' bond together as a distinctive social group is that few others are in a position to understand the contradictions that shape this life-journey. Often their friendship bonding is around how to cope with this life. The women live relatively encapsulated in a social world of relationships that is a clean break from their earlier existence, to which there is no return.

Living as a foreigner's wife requires a separation between the public outside face shaped by a need to demonstrate material 'success' and the inner personal experience of bearing the hidden existential costs and hard work of sustaining this type of life. These women's lives are structured around trying to resolve this gap between public expectations and social pressures that derive from their 'foreigner's wife' status, on one side, and the private inner loneliness of becoming a relative stranger within one's own family and country, while facing the difficulties of living with an (older) Western man, on the other. This is a challenging form of transnational living. Asked about her satisfaction with her financial gains from her husband, one woman's response is instructive:

I'm okay with this even though it's not enough. I'm also getting old and don't want to have more problems in my life. I want to see my boy graduate. Some people

look at Thai women and might think that these Thai women have a good life with foreigners. But they don't know the truth. That sometimes, or most of the time, these Thai women cry every day. (S)

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Guarnizo (2003, p. 671, footnote 7) coined 'transnational living' in his influential article arguing for a holistic appreciation of the global economic impact of migrant transnational agency. However, he explicitly refrained from discussing 'social' transnational flows of ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital; thus, his argument remained highly general and abstract, providing few clues of what 'transnational living' substantively means for people and places.
- <sup>2</sup> Western men are primarily a contextual reference point. For accounts of their lives, see Lafferty and Maher (2020) and Kanchanachitra and Chuenglersiri (2020).
- <sup>3</sup> See contributions to Constable (2005), Yang and Lu (2010) and Wei-Jun and Zheng (2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Data analysis of Thai 2010 Census and household registrations (available on request) shows Western men are on average 15 years older than their partners, 60% are 50 years or older and 35% are 60 years or older.

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