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# **Discordant Lifestyle Mobilities in East Asia: Privilege and Precarity of British retirement in Thailand<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the lifestyle mobilities of British retirees in Thailand, drawing on empirical research conducted in 2012. Thailand is host to a significant number of British retirees motivated by a search for a better lifestyle in Asia. This pursuit of mobility for lifestyle reasons, rather than economic gain or work, implies a relative privilege involving a range of choices and opportunities. For many, the lifestyle achieved in Thailand is perceived as mediating negative effects of ageing and enhancing wellbeing. However, the material challenges of lifestyle mobility in Thailand, such as frozen pensions, healthcare costs and property insecurity, destabilise an initial optimism and lead to feelings of entrapment and immobility in relation to state policy and practice. The article argues for a relational framing of lifestyle mobility as a means of understanding and analysing the differential experience of privilege and precarity in semi- or postcolonial locations.

Keywords: Lifestyle Mobilities; Retirement Migration; Precarity; Relationality

## **Introduction**

The search for a better lifestyle is a key motivation for spatial mobility in later life. While many use the time of retirement for travel, second-home ownership and seasonal migrations, others choose to make a permanent move overseas. In exploring these varied forms of lifestyle-related mobility scholars have tended to focus on intra-European flows from Northern European states to destinations like Spain and France (Benson, 2011; Casado-Diaz, 2006; Gustafson, 2008; King et al., 2000; Oliver, 2007; O'Reilly, 2000; Rodriguez et al., 1998). This article contributes to emerging work on lifestyle migration to the Global South through a focus on British retirees in Thailand (see also Benson, 2013 and Korpela, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. I adopt the conceptual framework of *lifestyle mobility* (Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark 2013) as a mechanism for bringing into focus the relationality of mobility for older migrants in this context.

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With over 50,000 British nationals residing in Thailand, this wave of migration is significant and offers a unique context for analysis (Sriskandarajah and Drew, 2006). Migration from so-called 'developed' to 'emerging' states involves geopolitical legacies of (semi-) colonial influence and structural privilege (Benson, 2013). The everyday experiences of leisure and consumption among British lifestyle migrants emphasise further the 'relative affluence' of their position in a global economic hierarchy (O'Reilly and Benson, 2009). This relative affluence is, however, masking some of the more precarious aspects of ageing abroad (Oliver, 2007; O'Reilly, 2000). Using data from interviews with retired lifestyle migrants in Thailand I argue that older migrants have simultaneous experiences of privilege and precarity, upholding their status as privileged white western expatriates with an enviable lifestyle of relaxation and cultural cosmopolitanism, whilst simultaneously negotiating constraints in access to basic economic, political and social rights. It is these aspects of precarity that belie the assumption that lifestyle mobility is solely the property of the privileged.

To address this argument, I critically engage with the concept of lifestyle mobilities (Cohen, et al., 2014), cross-referencing with scholarship on lifestyle and retirement migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; King et al, 2000; Oliver, 2008) to discuss *relationality* as a key component of lifestyle mobility. I use an empirical case study of British retirement migration to Thailand to explore the ways in which lifestyle migrants experience privilege and precarity in their everyday lives, focusing on three aspects of precarity<sup>ii</sup>: financial insecurity, health inequality and status discord. I argue that British retirees have discordant experiences of lifestyle mobility that are relational to particular socio-economic, political, historical and geographical contexts, with internal differentiation disrupting the notion of group-based relative privilege.

### **Lifestyle mobilities and Ageing**

The migration of older people has long been the concern of scholars of migrations studies, tourism and social gerontology. Writing in 2000, King, Warnes and Williams appealed for more research on later life migration and established a distinction between international retirement migration (IRM) and other types of migration. The central distinction of this type of mobility is in the non-economic motivations for mobility and the higher socio-economic status of international retirement migrants indicating a relatively privileged position on the migration spectrum. Alongside this, there has been a proliferation of useful

conceptualisations of later life migration in a range of settings motivated by lifestyle or life-stage transitions, such as lifestyle migration, residential tourism and retirement migration (Benson, 2011; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Oliver, 2008; O'Reilly, 2003; O'Reilly, 2000; Gustafson, 2008; Korpela, 2010; Rodriguez, 2001; Williams and Hall, 2000). Migration at retirement involves opportunities and challenges that differ from migration at any other part of the lifecourse. Retirement is viewed as a time of life when possibilities for mobility are opened up by the end of working life, diminished family responsibilities and greater levels of income and wealth (Warnes, 1993). It is also viewed as a period of transition, of identity crisis and 'liminality' (Oliver, 2008). International migration has also been seen as a way to optimise the ageing process, counteract cultural tropes of ageing as inactive or degenerative but rather see mobility as a way of achieving 'successful ageing' (Torres, 1999).

This article considers how ageing and mobility intersect through a critical engagement with the concept of 'lifestyle mobilities' (McIntyre, 2009; Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark, 2013). Before unpacking this concept it is first necessary to trace the theoretical trajectory of 'lifestyle' in migration scholarship. Lifestyle migration was originally conceived as distinct from IRM through the central theoretical focus on 'lifestyle' in the migration process (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Lifestyle migrants are theorised as 'relatively affluent' individuals who make 'informed and viable choices for mobility' in the quest for the 'good life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009:11). Drawing on Giddensian theories of modernity, O'Reilly and Benson (2009) suggest that lifestyle migration is an inevitable outcome of late modernity, connected to broad social changes such as globalization, individualization, flexibility in work and increased mobility. The motivations of lifestyle migrants to move abroad are narrated as an individualized quest for a better life, which, in relation to older migrants, counters cultural perceptions of ageing as passive and dependent (cf. Oliver 2008). Migration is conceptualised not as a one off event but rather a continuation of broader lifecourse experiences, and the fashioning of particular, though not unconstrained, 'lifestyle choices' across space and time. Using Bourdieu's definition of lifestyle and habitus, O'Reilly and Benson (2009:9) explain that 'lifestyles emerge as the result of particular material circumstances, and a specific class habitus; all lifestyle choices are thus mediated through our habitus, our embodied class-culture'. As such, lifestyle migration is viewed as a classed process, and one involving dimensions of marginalisation, ambivalence and liminality (Benson, 2011; Benson, 2015; Oliver, 2008; O'Reilly, 2000;). While lifestyle migrants

occupy a privileged position in relation to many migrants, such as migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers, there is an internal differentiation that obscures their status as affluent.

This tension has been explored elsewhere in work on retirement migration and expatriate geographies (Oliver, 2008; Fechter and Walsh, 2010). In her work on British retirees in Spain, Oliver (2008) uses the concept of 'liminality' to explore differentiated experience of ageing abroad. She emphasises the importance of historical and geographical context in analysing migrant relations but warns against taking the view of the British as 'colonisers'. Rather, she argues that there are 'strong internal distinctions' within the expatriate community in Spain. Oliver and O'Reilly (2010) have argued the continued relevance of class in analysing lifestyle or retirement migration. They use a Bourdieusian notion of habitus to show how British migrants in Spain reproduce class distinction in migration context showing how 'class is mapped onto space' (ibid: 62). Aspiring to and enacting a particular lifestyle abroad is relational to the broader histories, geographies and politics of the migration process and experience; it is related to prior contexts and catalysts that inform aspirations for a better life, as well as structural contingencies that promote, regulate or constrain mobility to and from certain places (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Oliver, 2008; O'Reilly, 2007).

In reworking existing theorisations of lifestyle migration, these authors have sought to draw on the 'new mobilities paradigm' to highlight the fluidity of mobility rather than see it as a one-off event of spatial mobility (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Cohen et al. (2013) argue that a focus on 'lifestyle mobilities' disrupts the boundary between travel, leisure and migration, leading to a fuller notion of mobile people and their dynamic experiences of belonging, place and identity across the lifecourse. As discussed, the focus on 'lifestyle' is not new and this work aims not to replace but to re-position existing scholarship on lifestyle migration to bring into view the multiple temporalities and spatialities of lifestyle-related mobility. This is a sophisticated reading of the spatial complexity of lifestyle-related mobility that acknowledges the broad spectrum of mobilities (corporeal, transnational, imaginative) as well as multiple moorings and place attachments. However, the engagement with fluidity and dynamism in lifestyle mobility does not fully capture the broader social relations that shape these mobilities. While there is recognition of the power asymmetries within lifestyle mobility and the situatedness of these mobilities in 'changing economic, environmental and techno-social contexts' (Cohen et al., 2013:13), these asymmetries are presented in a problematic dialectic of privilege and precarity. This article responds to Cohen et al.'s (2013:13) call for further

inquiry into ‘who’ can ‘choose’ lifestyle mobility, and to dissect the power asymmetries *within* it. In doing so, I hope to disrupt the view that privilege and precarity are dichotomous by analysing the relational hierarchies of lifestyle mobility in Thailand.

One of the key dilemmas for migration scholars conducting research with so-called ‘elite’ or ‘privileged’ migrants is how ‘relative power’ can be analysed taking account of migrant views and experiences of marginality whilst simultaneously recognising the impacts of material privilege in the migration context (Oliver, 2008). Viewing lifestyle mobility as a relational process encourages a more direct engagement with questions of power and the social relations that are implicated through mobility. Drawing on Cresswell (2010:18), I view mobility as a series of political ‘entanglements’, with traceable histories and geographies. Politics plays a part in the physical movement of people, as discussed elsewhere in migration studies and transport studies; there is also a politics of representation and the construction of discourses or ‘narratives’ about mobility; and finally politics is embedded in mobile practices and embodied experience. Cresswell does not conform to assumptions about the fluid nature of society without its associated politics and social relations and his is arguably a *relational* theory of mobility. Thinking relationally about lifestyle mobility means asking questions about the different imaginations, practices and representations of mobility and the inequalities they reproduce (cf. Sheller and Urry, 2006; Hannam et al., 2006; Cresswell, 2010; Adey, 2010; Schwanen and Ziegler, 2011; Soderstrom et al., 2013). Schwanen and Ziegler (2011) see a relational conception of mobility as connecting physical movement to psychological movement through the ‘mobility of the self’. This implicates a personal responsibility to move oneself forward through an engagement with difference and the nurturing of relations with other people. For older migrants, this practice denotes an attempt to maintain independence and enhance wellbeing through personal growth, yet it also reproduces neoliberal notions of individual responsibility absolving the state of welfare and healthcare costs for an ageing population (Schwanen and Ziegler, 2011).

A relational conception of lifestyle mobility is also concerned with how far *discordant* mobilities are reproduced as a result of particular intersectionalities in migrant identities and histories. The notion of discordance challenges the dichotomous assumption of lifestyle migrants as either privileged or marginalised (Korpela, 2013) and introduces the idea that privilege and precarity are mutually constitutive. However, lifestyle migrants are differentially exposed to both privilege and precarity depending on how their classed,

gendered and racialised subject positions intersect. Of course, this is not to suggest that the hardships experienced by many forced migrants is comparable to the precarious experiences of some lifestyle migrants, but that framing different migrants as ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ underplays the complexities of migrant biographies. In the following section I present empirical evidence to explore the relationalities of lifestyle mobility for British retirees in Thailand. Older migrants experience frictions of mobility due not only to the latent possibility of physical immobility brought about by the ageing process and the potential for ill-health, but also a feeling of entrapment or immobility caused by political, social and economic boundaries that emerge through migrant and expatriate status.

### **Researching British migration to Thailand: Context and Method**

The article is based on research undertaken in 2012 in Hua Hin, a beach-city resort situated 300 km south of Bangkok in the Gulf of Thailand. It is part of a wider study on ‘Lifestyle Migration in East Asia’ carried out in Malaysia, Thailand and China that explored the motivations, experiences and outcomes of lifestyle migration. This mixed-method ethnographic study involved an online survey for respondents in Thailand and Malaysia asking questions about motivations and experiences of living in these respective countries; life history interviews with western lifestyle migrants (65 interviews in Thailand and Malaysia) and social media analysis monitoring online expat forums during a 4-month period to explore activity levels and content of discussion topics and analysing expatriate magazines (audience, ethos, advertising). The interview data was analysed using an ethnographic approach that was iterative and inductive (O’Reilly, 2011). Key analytical themes were developed around the practices, structures and impacts of lifestyle migration based on a strong structuration theory (Stones, 2005). This approach enabled the research team to explore the interconnections and complexities of migrant experiences, the impacts on host communities, and how such experiences shape migrant identities.

The article draws specifically on a subset of interviews with 20 *retired* lifestyle migrants in Thailand aged between 50 and 75 (including early retired and those on retirement visa but also self-employed). The study itself included lifestyle migrants of all ages, including those in employment and education, however a large proportion of those who participated were retirees with 63% aged between 50 and 75 (two thirds of which were male and all but two of these men were in relationships with Thai women). All of these were on a ‘retirement visa’ demonstrating a variation in age cohorts after retirement (see Rallu, this issue; O’Reilly,

2000). Hua Hin has experienced various forms of lifestyle mobility that includes retirees, second homeowners, business expatriates, and those who have married into Thai families, denoting gendered migration flows (Howard, 2008). British retirees view Hua Hin as a peaceful and safe place with a better 'quality of life' than other 'expat enclaves' in Thailand, such as Pattaya and Koh Samui. Such characteristics chime with the heliotropic retirement migration and 'tourism-induced migration' (Williams and Hall, 2002) that has been observed in other parts of the world. The Thai government has also targeted a wealthy retirement market through the introduction of a retirement visa for foreigners over 50 years old who have annual income of 800,000 Baht invested in a Thai bank (Toyota, 2006). Furthermore, the availability of western conveniences, a recent property development boom and the expansion of wellness tourism and 'international-standard' healthcare are all place-specific incentives for retirement migration. As discussed, however, despite these incentives, many retired migrants experience hardship as they negotiate the ageing process (Hardill et al., 2005; Howard, 2008; Oliver, 2008; O'Reilly, 2000). I explore how the intersection of ageing and mobility engenders a double bind of precarity in three key areas: financial insecurity, health inequality and status discord.

### **Financial Insecurity**

*"Things are changing, it's not so easy to live here now. If you're retired you have to count your pennies a little bit" (Martin, age 54)*

Many lifestyle migrants in Hua Hin expressed concern over the degree of financial security they had as a result of the global economic downturn with many experiencing a drop in income. Although it is possible to draw a UK state pension in Thailand, the absence of a reciprocal agreement between Britain and Thailand on social security matters means annual increments are lost, effectively freezing the pension upon emigration. This coupled with a weakening British Pound against the Thai Baht means state-supported income is declining for pensioners. Keith, who has lived in Hua Hin since 1998, suggests a link between this decline and the return migration of some British retirees.

*"The Brits are on their way back...they haven't got the money anymore...you've got people who were on supposedly good money, so they say, going back to England and can't afford to live here on the rate of exchange" (Keith, age 64).*



Despite Keith's generalised commentary on return migration, the impact of frozen pensions should not be overstated and is contingent on the investments and retirement planning of individual migrants. Many had private pensions, property income and offshore savings and while there were grumbles about the high rates of tax, this was not perceived to be a serious financial concern for most. Rather, there were general grievances over the lack of transnational financial reciprocity between Thailand and Britain to make 'expats' feel more connected to Britain.

*“Overall, one thing you might hear is we do feel ex-communicated, especially pensions. It's sad when you think most of us worked for our pension and now we're being penalised but on the plus side we get a lot more than we would do if we lived in the UK – pouring rain, a heating bill” (Robert, age 67).*

The feeling of ex-communication and being 'let down' by the British government was a common grievance. Britain was often represented as a place of disillusionment, regret and disenfranchisement, the relational 'Other' that present experiences of financial insecurity are charged against. This echoes notions that retirement migration is related to prior contexts and catalysts, attachments or detachments to place which are often narrated as 'post-hoc rationalisations' for mobility (Ross as cited in Oliver, 2008:160). However, some remarked that many lifestyle migrants contradictorily position their insecurity relative to an imagined 'good life' suggesting that the degree of economic precarity they experience is counterbalanced by the continued quest for an aspirational lifestyle (cf. Benson, 2011).

*“Those same people enjoying the good life here, they still whinge and moan about the cost of stuff. We get by, my pension funds are limited and they've reduced by 40% now because of the Baht but we cut back on a few things and we have a nice lifestyle still. I don't think things are much more expensive than they were 5 years ago. We do different things” (Gordon, age 66).*

Here, Gordon plays down the effects of the financial squeeze on his own lifestyle. As a former businessman he has a comfortable private pension and feels that despite exchange rate differentials, he maintains a 'nice lifestyle' including playing golf, dining out in restaurants with occasional holidays. This suggests that while lifestyle migrants may not be immune from the impacts of a global recession, the affordability of a 'nice lifestyle' in Thailand is still more than possible and indicates positive mobility futures for older migrants. The different

degrees of affluence among this small group of retired lifestyle migrants in Thailand shows that wealth and financial security are relational to overarching financial governance regimes and the absence of reciprocal transnational arrangements in the global pensions market. These constrain mobility options and cause uncertainty for some older age migrants if upon migration their income levels fluctuate and devalue as destination country economies strengthen. Mitigating against this uncertainty requires individual responsibility for managing ageing abroad via personal investments and private pensions, as well as psychological preparedness that there are no state-sanctioned financial ‘safety nets’ for older migrants (Schwanen and Ziegler, 2011).

### **Health Inequality**

A key motivation for lifestyle mobility is to improve wellbeing through a better quality of life. Most of those interviewed in Hua Hin claimed that their health and wellbeing had improved since moving to Thailand due to the climate and more active lifestyles. Many narrated their active lifestyles with an emphasis on *productive* leisure time and maximising the time left distancing themselves from negative ideas about ageing, dependency and immobility. As Oliver (2008:162) found among British retirees in Spain, many people sought to recant the image of retirement as a period of ‘monotony, security, control by other people’. Motifs of ‘successful ageing’ in Thailand were emphasised through engagement in charity work, playing sports and having an active social life, particularly among British women. Such lifestyles were often judged against the wasteful and non-productive lifestyles of others (Torres, 1999; Oliver, 2008), usually men, who were perceived to be ‘wasting time’ in ‘*girly bars*’ and ‘*start drinking at 10am*’ (Sylvia, age 55). The gendered experience of healthy living in Thailand demonstrate not only how different subject positions intersect to produce differential experience and health and wellbeing, but also how mobility and immobility are imagined and lived out in these spaces. Furthermore, the act of doing charity work in Thailand meant that many British women actively circumvented Thai law since without a work permit charity work is illegal. Carol remarks here on her lack of ‘choice’ in being retired and criticises the Thai state for regulating such activities.

*“I’ve got no choice but to be retired...I volunteer but technically you’re not allowed to which is very strange. I was floored when someone told me I couldn’t do that. I think it’s such a waste of resources... Just because you’re 50 and retired it doesn’t*

*mean your brain stops functioning. It's something the Thai government should really look at" (Carol, age 53).*

This example shows how lifestyle migrants are willing to bypass regulatory frameworks to remain active in later life and denounce cultural tropes of ageing in migration destinations. Despite the prospects of an active lifestyle in Thailand, the practice of keeping healthy and staving off potential immobility through access to medical treatment was a significant concern for many of those planning to grow older in Thailand. There is no free mainstreamed health service in Thailand although state hospitals do provide medical treatment at a fraction of the cost of their private counterparts. Thailand is fast becoming South East Asia's health tourism capital through investment in private healthcare and costs are high due to the internationalisation of services and staff (Toyota, 2006; Thornton, 2013). Here Margaret considers the financial viability of going private.

*"...We both had become very un-enamoured with private hospitals...every time you go they want to prescribe you something that you don't need and test you for something you don't have and they're very quick to say we must do this and that and then you suddenly get a bill for £700 or £800" (Margaret, age 51).*

While some lifestyle migrants offset these costs with health insurance, almost half of those interviewed had no health insurance and many had paid vast sums for medical treatment whilst living in Thailand (see O'Reilly, 2007 for similar finding in Spain). Some also commented on the lacuna of support for foreigners with mental health issues in Hua Hin, drawing on anecdotal accounts of men and women experiencing depression due to relationship problems and alcohol dependency.

*"...If you have something like a mental health problem – I've never seen a psychologist or psychiatrist or someone with a PhD sticker for that. I've only seen on the forum people whinging about depression. [The men] start drinking and it's a downhill spiral, but that's only my observations, just what I see" (Michael, age 60).*

In the absence of Thai state provision the British Embassy came under scrutiny and some suggested additional support was required for those in crisis – *"to put an arm round them and say we'll look after you and get you out of this"* (Nigel, age 63). While there is information

signposting 'vulnerable' Britons to local agencies, provision varies in different regions. Local migrant community organisations and NGO's in parts of Europe offer important support for ageing migrants as Oliver (2007) and Hardill et al. (2005) have shown. In Hua Hin however, there was little evidence of this type of support with most people sorting problems out for themselves or consulting informal expat (online) networks.

A final area of concern for retired lifestyle migrants in Hua Hin is related to long-term health care provision. There were different solutions cited for long term care planning with privately sourced home-care seen as preferable for those who could afford it. Jane moved to Thailand 10 years ago, she is a retired single woman and her main income is from property development in Hua Hin. She has made preparations for a live-in carer if she requires care in later life.

*"Your money goes further here and the other thing – I'm alone and when I was first living where I'm living now my neighbour was a lady I've known for donkey's years... When [she] got very ill we hired a carer for her that was there 24 hours a day and it cost her less than £400 a month for 24 hour care. When I bought my house I bought a little house next to it, so that when I get old and infirm I can have somebody live in...In the UK, if I'm growing old and I'm on my own we're looking at double that a week" (Jane, age 54)*

This type of home care arrangement was viewed by many as preferable to paying the '*farang price*' for state-supported healthcare<sup>iii</sup>. For many men with Thai wives, however, the option to look to the state for support in later life was rarely considered, suggesting gendered disparities in home care plans. Most saw their relationships as the solution to their longer term needs with farang-Thai marriage viewed as a '*mutually beneficial relationship*' (Oliver, age 55), a transactional exchange of care for older men incorporating traditional, gendered values of *nam jai* (Howard, 2008) in return for financial security for Thai wives<sup>iv</sup>.

In contrast, for some British women (married to British men) there was a common narrative of potential return to draw on family networks or UK state care.

*“I wouldn’t be at all surprised [if we go home] because that’s the time when I think we might say maybe we have to return, because we physically can’t cope on our own and we don’t have anybody to turn to” (Margaret, age 51).*

This extract suggests that for some long-term residents in heliotropic retirement locations, a potential return migration to their home state is likely as the latter stages of ageing bring about practical challenges and care needs (cf. Hunter, 2011). As such, this mobility is not necessarily a permanent settlement but contingent on changes in lifestyle as ageing takes hold (Cohen et al., 2013). Returning home for care is less likely among those who cannot access private healthcare and/or have diminishing transnational family ties due to mixed British-Thai marriage and making home in Thailand.

Health security in Thailand is a key concern for British retirees and an issue that is relational to gendered and class identities of migrants, as well as the transnational social structures of support (familial, community, state) available to them. The lacuna of affordable state services for basic healthcare, mental health and long-term care demonstrates further the emphasis on individual responsibility for older migrants to look after themselves and cope with the adverse effects of ageing unsupported. This expectation is relational to the broader social and political agendas that promote individualized and privatised trajectories for health and wellbeing, as well as the socio-cultural meanings of care and wellbeing in this particular geographical context. A potential impact of the absence of support is an increase in the liminal status of some lifestyle migrants in relation to others and pressure to individually cope with the degenerative impacts of ageing in this particular context (cf. Oliver, 2008).

### **Discordant status**

Fechter and Walsh (2010:1207) suggest that in many places the status of the ‘expatriate’ is changing, suggesting that white, western migrants have ‘lost some of the social, economic and political prominence they had in the past’. This ambiguous status is reproduced through a lack of formal welfare or integration policies due to their perceived agency and reluctance for settlement (O’Reilly, 2007). The British in Thailand encapsulate this tension. While a shared colonial heritage in postcolonial states is a pervasive marker of privilege reproduced at the local level (Benson, 2013), it is also disrupted by intersections of class and gender (Fechter and Walsh, 2010; Leonard, 2010). Thailand was never formally colonized, but it is referred to as a ‘semi-colonial’ state because of its distinct combination of royal and elite military power

alongside the penetration of western influence in Thai modernity (Harrison, 2010). While the west has been represented as ‘a privileged Other in the Thai imagination’ (Harrison, 2010:10), the status of the westerner or *‘farang’* in Thailand is intricately connected to Thai notions of elite power and class distinction. As narrated by my interviewees Thailand is a classed state with the royal elite occupying the upper echelons of society; ‘Bangkok Thai’s’ as the affluent Thai Chinese middle classes; and ‘peasant’ classes from rural regions. Farangs are positioned somewhere in the middle, in an ambiguous and contested space between semi-colonial nostalgia and the familiar yet excluded denizen, both of which are clothed in gendered and racialised representations. Lifestyle migrants were aware of their privileged status as a ‘westerner’ and while some saw this as denoting the ‘good life’ due to the respect they encountered for their whiteness, gender, affluence and semi-colonial connotations, there was also a degree of ambivalence (cf. Benson, 2013).

*“We’re perceived as being rich, beautiful because we’re fair, culturally the darker the skin the more you are a peasant. The girls in Bangkok spend a lot of money on skin whitening. We’re still perceived as a foreigner, doesn’t matter if you’ve lived here for years or a citizen – you’re farang” (Robert, age 67).*

According to Robert, whiteness is an important marker of status, however, despite the appearance of privilege the label *‘farang’* implies difference and exclusion from the Thai norm. In a later extract, Robert reflects on the class-based frictions between different social groups in Thailand.

*“...The rich Thai’s in Bangkok do not like farangs like me marrying a peasant Thai girl because I elevate her status. She gets brownie points because she’s married a farang, if she has a child she goes up another level”*

Westerners, it is claimed, are merely tolerated by middle class Thais and the presence of *mia farang* (Thai women married to western men) and *‘luk-khreung’* (mixed race, Thai-farang children) is perceived as a source of tension between middle class Thai and westerners. Pattana (2010:71) suggests, however, that ‘while sections of the political elite and the educated middle classes complain about the vanishing of Thainess, the rest of the populace is rarely concerned by this issue and does not see farang as a threat to the foundations of Thai identities’. Moreover, in recent decades *luk-khreung* have been celebrated as representing the

modern and cosmopolitan Thai linked to global modernities, Thai tolerance of diversity, and new aesthetics (Weisman, 2000).

A further point that expounds the status of the British in Thailand is the way in which British people respond to different migrant labels. While some felt comfortable with the term 'farang' or 'expat', others expressed disdain to what was perceived to be the 'expat' lifestyle. Margaret explains why she rejects expat lifestyles,

*"...I think the word expat lifestyle has a lot of negative connotations too, it feels as if you've got to consume a lot of beer and alcohol. I would certainly say that we didn't come out here to spend our time socialising with Brits over gin and tonics" (Margaret, age 51).*

This representation of the expatriate lifestyle is based on a set of assumptions about behaviour and practices. Margaret's extract implies that British expat lifestyle is characterised by consumption and engagement with the familiar. Her narrative is almost a cosmopolitan disavowal of expatriate identity underpinned by core values of moderation and respect for 'others', yet simultaneously resisting certain 'others' that conjure up too much of the familiar stereotype of 'Brits abroad'. Both Oliver (2008) and O'Reilly (2000) found that British migrants in Spain reproduced class distinctions by claiming cosmopolitan orientations over perceived working class cultures.

The classed, gendered and racialised intersections of different migrant labels suggest that privilege alone is an inadequate frame for understanding distinctions of lifestyle mobility. Tensions emerge through the exercise of privilege and the experience of white westerners in Thailand should not be analysed as bound only to semi-colonial histories but increasingly in relation to the current social and political frame within which 'farang' is located. This relational portrait of lifestyle mobility involves particular socio-cultural practices and interactions, e.g. bi-national marriage, consumption practices. Add to this the political status of 'farang' as a non-citizen required to pay fees for residency and make annual visa renewals, and lifestyle migrants remain in a fragile and de-rooted state hovering above citizenship without key economic and political rights and '*no safety net*' (Nigel, age 63). The precariousness of this status played out in migrant narratives with many people referring to 'farang' as 'guests' in Thailand.

*“The first hurdle you got to get over is the fact that you’re a guest and that’s all you’re ever gonna be – a grateful guest of Thailand. I fully understand that I’m never going to be Thai no matter how hard I try...Even if they gave me a passport, I’d be a guest. I’m too big and fat and the wrong colour. It’s getting it through your head that you’re living in a place where for all intents and purposes you have no security. For a lot of people they can’t get that through their heads. They’re the ones that have screwed this place up – the British thinking they have rights, you have nothing and as soon as you accept it you’re ok.” (Keith, age 64).*

Despite the insecurities, most maintained an overwhelming desire to stay in Thailand. The ‘frustrations’ of living in Thailand without rights were wilfully dismissed with the phrase, ‘this is Thailand’. Once their precarious status was accepted many British residents negotiated the system using a range of strategies, such as the use of ‘T money’ to avoid visa problems and motoring fines<sup>v</sup>. Just as I have challenged the notion of privilege as a universally experienced feature of the British experience of Thailand, these negotiations and acceptances of British migrant lives also challenges the notion of precarity. While technically they occupy a liminal space, few would refer to themselves as living a precarious life, supporting O’Reilly’s (2007) findings for the British living in Spain. As such, it has not been an intention of this article to frame the British experience in Thailand as despairing or marginal, but rather to argue the nuances of older migrant experiences of privilege and precarity as relationally bound to historic mobilities and current practices.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to put forward a relational framework for the study of lifestyle mobilities, to recognise the discordant experiences of privilege and precarity experienced by British retirees in Thailand. This framework allows the multiple and overlapping socio-spatial mobilities experienced by older migrants in Thailand to be explicitly drawn out, paying particular attention to the mutually constitutive nature of privilege and precarity. For British retirees, the heritage of expatriate or semi-colonial status in Thailand is challenged through the present frame of being ‘farang’ or a ‘grateful guest’. Furthermore, the sense of wellbeing and prosperity gained by living in a warmer place with a lower cost of living is juxtaposed by British and Thai state-imposed limitations on access to particular services, such as pensions and healthcare, for economic and social wellbeing. These services are increasingly important



as migrants age in place and experience unexpected challenges in relation to health and mobility. Although some have made preparations and allocated funds for ageing in Thailand, for others there are more limited options. As such, the discordant experiences of finance, health and status among retired British migrants in Hua Hin suggest particular classed, gendered and racialised intersectionalities. This is compounded by the differentiated histories of mobility of British migrants, with some experiencing prior expat mobilities in the region and others making their first move to Thailand upon retirement. Furthermore, the structural position of these 'relatively affluent' individuals as 'ageing' and 'retired' confounds the experience of precarity in austere times, and their position as 'migrant' involves a degree of risk and uncertainty and limits the opportunity to rely on 'safety nets' in the home and host states.

More broadly, the paper contributes to scholarship on relational mobilities through an engagement with questions of power and differentiation in the practice of lifestyle migration and mobilities (Benson, 2015; Cresswell, 2010; Adey, 2010; Schwanen and Ziegler, 2011; O'Reilly and Benson, 2009). Responding to calls for more in-depth analyses of the power asymmetries *within* lifestyle-related mobility (Cohen et al., 2013), the paper challenges thinking on privilege and precarity as binary positions. Too often studies of migration processes and practices begin with an underdeveloped notion of 'the migrant', foregrounding group behaviours that rely on longstanding typologies that pitch one type of migration against another in an uncritical hierarchy. I posit that this is done at the expense of engagement with the intersectional, inter-subjective and relational dynamics of mobility that are socio-economic, political, cultural, familial and personal. Recognising the relationality of mobility enables migration scholars to re-position these hierarchies in order not to reproduce them and show that hierarchies are themselves relational to geography and politics. This is not only relevant for scholars of lifestyle mobility, but for migration scholars more broadly working to challenge the inequalities that are implicated through it. A Bangkok tuk tuk driver remarked to me when I inquired about a postcard of London in his cab – *'I never go anywhere, I drive tuk tuk, this is for tourist'*. Here, the paradox of mobility is evident through his contradictory experience of everyday, often tourist-generated, mobility alongside economic barriers to international travel and the perception of never having gone anywhere. At the heart of this issue is the notion that mobility reproduces inequality in new places and new forms and the experience of 'privilege' or 'precarity' mutates in the context of global recession, geopolitical displacement, and reconfigurations of place, identity and mobility across the lifecycle.

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<sup>i</sup> This article is part of a wider ESRC project that explores not only North-South lifestyle migration (in Thailand and Malaysia) but also intra-Asian lifestyle migration (from Hong Kong to China)

<sup>ii</sup> For precarity, I am drawing primarily on Ettliger's (2007, p.320) conceptualisation that sees precarity as 'located in the micro spaces of everyday life', involving multi-scalar processes that are materialised in social, economic and political forms and embedded in everything from 'global political economy to the vicissitudes of employment, health, social relations, self-perception'. This universality of precarity does not imply that it is felt in the same way and does not preclude important work on particular forms of precarity e.g. work (Anderson, 2010), but rather that precarity is relative to socio-economic and political circumstance (Butler, 2009; Waite, 2009).

<sup>iii</sup> Farang is a term used in Thailand by Thai citizens and Westerners living in Thailand to denote a person of European ancestry, usually used in reference to Westerners with white skin.

<sup>iv</sup> Nam Jai translates as 'generosity' towards family.

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<sup>v</sup> T money refers to the bribery of officials to circumvent regulations and rules in Thailand (e.g. in visa renewals).