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Diminished Transnationalism? Growing older and practicing home in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the intersection of home and transnationalism for British retirees in Thailand. I argue that by making a permanent move to Thailand retirees experience a diminished transnationalism as they commit to ageing in place and their ties to Britain weaken. Using empirical research collected in Thailand in 2012, I focus on permanent British ‘lifestyle migrants’ and the way in which they negotiate ageing and migration through diverse material and emotional ‘homemaking practices’ (Walsh, 2011). The conceptual relevance of transnationalism for older age migrants is also considered as transnational networks become unworkable and unsustainable in the context of ageing.

Introduction

This chapter explores the ‘home-making’ practices of British retirees in Thailand, I argue that by making a permanent move to Thailand the retiree experience of transnationalism is diminished as they commit to ageing in place and their ties to Britain weaken. Drawing on empirical research conducted with ‘lifestyle migrants’ (O’Reilly and Benson, 2009) in the beach-city resort of Hua Hin in 2012, the paper focuses on a small sample of permanent British residents who have, for various reasons, committed to growing older in Thailand. They prepare for and negotiate the ageing process in Thailand using diverse ‘home-making practices’ (Walsh, 2011b). These range from the material aspects of home construction and renovation to the emotional and imaginative sense of belonging gained through bi-national relationships and marriages that often reproduce gendered notions of care and companionship in the home. Britain is increasingly perceived as an unworkable alternative in older age often resulting in dwindling connections to friends and relatives, which brings into question the sustainability of transnational networks and loyalties in later life. With this in mind, the paper also considers the conceptual relevance of transnationalism for older age migrants who move for lifestyle reasons and commit to ageing in place.

Home and Transnationalism

Home is central to the study of transnationalism. Studies of migrant transnationalism draw attention to the fluid, mobile and ‘pluri-local’ nature of home (Rouse, 1991) disrupting notions of the fixed, bounded and stable abode. Transnational migrants, it is argued, can have ‘dual loyalties’ to two or more homes at once across ‘de-territorialised’ social fields (Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Vertovec, 1999). The multiple attachments to home that are created through migration have been studied in myriad ways, from ‘emotional transnationalism’ where the imagination of ‘home’ can be replicated ‘from afar, through... memories, folk talks and intricate performances of tradition’ (Burrell, 2003) to everyday practices of transnational homing. Such practices include remittances, watching transnational TV and home construction that ‘provide a structure of meaning to the acts of crossing borders,

living in bi-national households, and reproducing transnational social relations' (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998:18; see also Al-Ali and Koser, 2002; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; van Hear, 2002). This is not to say that attachments to place completely disappear. Many have questioned the notion of 'rootless mobility' that underplays the significance of place in migration and the desire to make a home (Ahmed et al., 2003; Cresswell, 2006; Brah, 1996). Ralph and Staeheli (2011) critique recent migration research for the lack of attention paid to the tension between the mobile and sedentary aspects of home:

"...In the rush to conceptualise novel transnational configurations of people-place relationships some researchers overemphasise the shifting and mobile meanings that migrants give to home, while underplaying the resilience of its stable, bounded and fixed interpretations" (p.517).

Critical geographers agitate conventional assumptions about home by drawing attention to the spatialities and social relations that shape its meaning (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Sibley, 1995). Blunt and Dowling (2006:22) stress the need to explore 'the nexus between home, power and identity'; to conceive home as both imagined and material, and as multi-scalar. Inspired by a feminist and cultural geography this paper conceives home as a 'spatial imaginary' that involves gendered social relations and particular materialities (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Domosh, 1998, Gorman-Murray, 2011; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Miller, 2001; Tolka-Kelly, 2004; Nowicka, 2006). I draw particularly on Blunt and Dowling's notion of home as relational comprising both material and social relationships. It is through various 'home-making practices' that the relational geographies of home can be understood; 'home is lived; what home means and how it is materially manifest are continually created and re-created through everyday practices' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006:23; also see Walsh, 2011b).

Transnational migrants are not static actors, they engage in particular practices at different points in their migration (Al-Ali and Koser, 2002). As such, it is important to unpack the dynamics of transnationalism across the lifecourse and its conceptual value in exploring ageing and migration. This chapter focuses on the meaning of home for older age lifestyle migrants in Thailand. I disrupt ideas about lifestyle migrants as transnational actors through exploring the place-based home-making practices they engage in. I draw on Benson and O'Reilly's definition of lifestyle migrants (LMs) as 'relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify something loosely defined as quality of life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009:621). LMs are often positioned as elite actors engaged in a form of privileged migration, yet not all of these migrants fall easily into the category of the transnational elite. While there are overlaps, LMs do not, for example, exhibit the same characteristics as expatriates, being distinguished by their distinct motivations and experiences of migration as lifestyle-related (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). While much of the work on expatriate mobilities and lifestyle migration has sought to unpack these different experiences (Benson, 2013, 2011; Fechter and Walsh, 2010; King et al., 2000; Leonard, 2010; O'Reilly, 2000) there is further scope to explore these issues in the context of retirement and ageing bringing forth a focus on the lifecourse. Similar to Walsh's (2011a) observations on the British in Dubai, there are challenges to Britons' status as privileged in Thailand. These include their position relative to the growing Thai middle and

elite classes, their financial insecurity due to exchange rate differentials and frozen pensionsⁱ, and the ambiguous ‘semi-colonial’ status of westerners in Thailand. At the same time, however, many Western retirees in Thailand are retired expatriates and so former members of the so-called transnational elite. They are thus more used to negotiating transnational ways of living. While there is not space to explore each of these aspects here, it is important to recognise that the transnational experiences of Westerners in Thailand are highly differentiated and retirees have wide-ranging choices and entitlements based on the specific framework of social relations they operate within. In the following sections I reflect on how the meaning of transnationalism and home change over the lifecourse. I argue that as older lifestyle migrants commit to ageing in place they can experience a weakening of transnational ties to their home states. LMs in Thailand are engaged in distinct home-making practices that lead to a diminished transnationalism.

Lifestyle Migration in East Asia: Methods and Context

The following is based on ESRC-funded research aimed at exploring Lifestyle Migration in East Asia. The research sought to analyse emerging patterns of lifestyle-related mobility in three East Asian states – Thailand, Malaysia and China. I focus here on work undertaken in 2012 in the beach-city resort of Hua Hin, situated 300km south of Bangkok in the Gulf of Thailandⁱⁱ. Here, I conducted narrative interviews with 34 (Western) lifestyle migrants of all ages to explore the motivations, experiences and outcomes of lifestyle migration in Thailand. Hua Hin has experienced various forms of lifestyle migration and residential tourism, including retirees, second homeowners, business expatriates, and those who have married into Thai families, suggesting gendered migration flows (Howard, 2008). Hua Hin is perceived as a desirable location for ‘quality of life’ reasons, such as climate and lower living costs. The availability of western conveniences, a recent property development boom and ‘international standard’ healthcare facilities offer a number of place-specific incentives for retirement migration.

The following empirical analysis is based on a sample of retired lifestyle migrants. These narratives have been selected from a broader sample of LM’s to demonstrate the particular priorities of lifestyle migrants in the process of retirement. As such the sample comprising men (9) and women (6), who self-identify as retired. They are aged between 45 and 71 and consider themselves, psychologically and through their visa status, to have made a permanent migration to Thailand. All of these were residents of Hua Hin on a ‘retirement visa’, including some women named on their husband’s retirement visa who self-identify as retired themselvesⁱⁱⁱ. Some of these women were in their mid 40s and identified as ‘early retired’ suggesting that retirement migration is not necessarily a migration of the ‘elderly’ (O’Reilly, 2000).

Making home in Thailand

“We both just fell in love with the place, it happens to so many people that come to Hua Hin in particular, they just settle, it’s a feeling. It’s not necessarily the place, just a feeling of... it’s a comfort feeling, everything is right, you know” (Paula)

For retired Britons making Thailand their home was both a material and imaginative process. Here, Paula portrays Hua Hin as a desirable location to ‘settle’ through the imaginative trope of comfort. Over the past decade the housing market in the city has developed to accommodate the lifestyle priorities of older Westerners who have high levels of disposable income and an abundance of leisure time. These are not the transnational high rise developments designed to house a transient and mobile population of elite expatriates as in other parts of Southeast Asia, but rather a settlement offering a semi-permanent, private (and often gated) space in a suburban development. Usually plots are bought speculatively, buying into the vision of a property rather than its material form and placing value on the ‘newness’ of a development thereby recreating the suburban ideal (Oncu, 1997). According to an estate agent in Hua Hin, Western retirees are *‘the big market which we’re all aiming for’*. While the ownership of land is illegal for foreigners in Thailand, there are a number of methods employed to circumvent these regulations, including a risky ‘nominee ownership’ agreement with a Thai (business) partner^{iv}. This method was commonly employed by LMs in Hua Hin with many seeing it as a risk worth taking and the partial ownership of land as enough to cultivate the feeling of settlement. As Michael reflects “*...most of all I wanted a proper house with my own parking place and my own land.*”

Renovation was also perceived as an important process of ‘feeling’ at home. Alongside a Western property development boom there has been a proliferation of western style DIY stores, such as Homepro^v offering ‘international-standard’ home improvement services and products. While many of those building and renovating homes in Hua Hin were second homeowners, for some these homes have become retirement mainstays involving selling up in the UK and committing to ageing in Thailand. This can be seen most notably in the construction of extensions to houses for home help. For Jane, a single woman in her 50s, there was a clear sense that in order to age comfortably in Thailand she had to make plans for her future care needs.

“Your money goes further here and the other thing...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. I’ve still got privacy but I’ve got someone living there... that was the idea behind building the little house – if I needed help. In the UK, if I’m growing old and I’m on my own we’re looking at double that a week”.

For Jane, the affordability of live-in care is regarded as a key benefit to ageing in Thailand compared to the costs of residential care in Britain. Some LMs facing the health risks associated with older age are thus committed to managing their options in Thailand, rather than returning to source care through family connections or state-supported welfare.

Ageing in Thailand was also considered by some to be better than in Britain due to the perceived treatment of older people in Thai society incorporating values of care and respect that are viewed as absent in the west. As Margaret, a retired woman from London comments

“Something has gone wrong with our value system and our moral system. It is sunny and that’s very nice but there are a lot of things that I feel very strongly about here that I think we’ve completely lost in England... there’s still respect for older people and the way older people are cared for. I think we’ve lost so much...And the quality of life that goes with that, there’s more to the quality of life than sunshine and cheap food and cheap beer”.

Cultural assumptions about Thai values of care and the family appear to guide a perception that there are better options for the elderly in Thailand, irrespective of family connections. For those in bi-national marriages with Thai women these options are more readily available though gendered frameworks of care reducing the need to return to Britain for state supported healthcare. Here Oliver and Gordon, two British retirees currently in relationships with Thai women, reflect on the benefits of bi-national relationships for later life care and security in Thailand.

“Basically people should look on it as a mutually beneficial relationship, they get the care and attention they need and somebody gets the security they require. It can work for people, and it does work for an awful lot of people”. (Oliver)

“Yes I do [belong here], probably because of the strength of my wife’s family I guess. I do feel I’m coming home when I come back to Thailand”. (Gordon)

Gordon’s quote shows that a central aspect of feeling at home in Thailand are the family and social relationships that enhance a sense of belonging and cultivate an attachment to place. Similarly, Keith, a retired British man in his 60s who has lived in Hua Hin for 10 years talks of how encounters beyond the household have generated for him, a loyalty and attachment to Thailand (cf. Blunt and Dowling, 2006).

“I actually consider myself nearly Thai now, I know that sounds daft. The local Thai MP we meet up with him regularly, we always get invited to the Karaoke parties in the jungle in the (army) camp there, mainly because our brother in law is a captain. We go up there and I have to be dressed as a Thai in the sarongs and they think that’s hilarious. ...I would join the army and defend Thailand just as much as I would in England, that’s how much Thailand means to me and I wouldn’t think twice about it. The last thing I would think about would be to jump on a plane to England and be scuttling away in the corner no”

Despite a lack of formal citizenship rights, Keith expresses a strong attachment to Thai nationalism borne out through his interactions with the Thai elite in Hua Hin. By engaging in

these relationships he has arguably cultivated a ‘mutation of citizenship’ (Ong, 2006) afforded by his status as ‘farang’ (foreigner) and his marriage to a Thai woman. This has enabled him to be incorporated into systems that he might otherwise have been excluded from. This provides an interesting contrast to studies of migrant integration where dominant groups ‘impose categories of belonging’ leading to feelings of exclusion among migrants (Ralph and Staeheli, 2013; also see Ehrkamp and Leithner, 2006). Keith’s narrative suggests that, while belonging to a place requires the external validation of others, internal processes of validation are also significant suggesting particular power relations at work in these social worlds. As Brickell (2012:227) notes, the home is ‘a vulnerable crucible to wider political processes’. It is therefore important to acknowledge the wider processes that perpetuate exclusions and inequalities in the home and interrogate the intersection between the personal and the structural (cf. Gorman-Murray, 2011). Thailand was never formally colonised by Western powers, although many have argued that ‘indirect colonization’ by the British gave Thailand a ‘semi-colonial status’ during the 19th century and thus the influence of western modernity on the national habitus is evident (Loos, 2006:17; Harrison and Jackson, 2010). In the Hua Hin narratives, there are few explicit references to the colonial heritage of the British in Thailand. However, what does come through is an implicit sense of entitlement to belong in these spaces. Whether this is inherited from growing up with knowledge of the Empire, or embedded in the experience of being ‘farang’ in modern Thailand, there is an unintentional position of privilege.

Diminished transnationalism?

In addition to forming attachments and making home in Thailand, some LMs were engaged in a simultaneous process of deconstructing home in Britain through letting go of ‘safety net’ properties and an emotional separation from particular locales. This was manifest in dwindling return visits and diminished transnational ties to particular locations in Britain as home.

“I used to say, being a proud Scot that Scotland would always be home wherever I was living but it’s weird, it’s funny when you go there and I’m coming back I say to my friends I’m going home, and my friends say oh you think of Thailand as home do you? And I said ‘yeah I do actually’, it was like took a few years to get that change. The first time I went back to Scotland and when we first moved here I couldn’t wait to get back here, and it was weird, the second time I went, I was only supposed to be staying in Scotland for three weeks and I was balling my eyes out saying I didn’t want to go back (to Thailand)... and the next time I wanted again to come back to Thailand. A few people say that, you’ve got to go back two or three times to convince yourself you’ve done the right thing. I mean Mike said let’s go back in June, just gone, and I said no I don’t want to, my heart’s not in it so what’s the point of spending all that money”

Paula talks about a fading emotional attachment to Scotland and the ‘shifting definition’ of home (Sichel cited in Blunt and Dowling, 2006:219. Despite the initial expression of national

belonging, by the end of the extract she admits ‘my heart’s not in it’. There is little attempt to establish a dual loyalty to Scotland and Thailand, but rather one replaces the other as emotional attachments to places shift. The waning sense of belonging to Scotland and acknowledgement of Thailand as ‘home’ is also influenced by the increasing cost of air travel between the two places, making it increasingly difficult to justify the financial cost of return visits. The feeling of home is thus inevitably connected to the ‘hard edge of the economy’ (Smith, 2008 cit. Brickell, 2012).

Internal mobility of friends and family in Britain was also a factor in reducing the number of return visits because LMs had no single point of return, leading to a scattering of transnational ties. Martin explains how his scattered networks have meant that his family visit him in Thailand, reducing his need to return to Britain.

“All my friends and family moved away so there’s no central area to go back to. Friends come over here, my mum came here. Mum’s getting older so there’s less chance of her coming back again and again”.

However, despite internal and international migration of relatives causing fewer links with particular locations, engagement in transnational practices to keep in touch with family were maintained. Sylvia has a son living in Australia, with whom she communicates transnationally through Skype.

“...Since Skype and stuff, I speak to my son in Australia two or three times a week for the grandchildren. When I first came there were internet cafes – it’s obviously getting better...I’d find it a lot harder if there wasn’t [Skype] – to be able to see the grandchildren and have little chats...I think if there wasn’t a computer and be able to see them I’d be a lot more homesick”

Sylvia hails the advent of Skype giving her the opportunity to ‘see’ her family and mediate the effect of proximal contact. Sylvia’s transnational connections are arguably with people, not places. She has unmade home in the UK to settle in Thailand, yet she uses the term ‘homesick’ in relation to unfamiliar locations in Australia where her children now live. Her experience of home is multi-sited yet her loyalty is to the people inhabiting particular geographies, rather than the place itself. As she engages in transnational practices of communication, she is nurturing transnational family connections whilst simultaneously disrupting loyalties to particular geographies. In this sense, engagement in transnational practices (e.g. offshore finance, western consumption practices, and transnational communication) does not necessarily signal emotional connections and loyalties to Britain as home. Here we could distinguish between conceptualisations of transnational identities or communities (Portes, 1997) or transnationalism *sui generis* (Basch et al., 1992) and the more nuanced articulations of ‘middling’ transnationalism that connect particular classed, gendered and familial sites of meaning (Conradson and Latham, 2005).

For many of those who had moved to Thailand upon retirement, the experience of growing older in Britain and witnessing different social changes had led to a feeling of

disenchantment. For some there were specific associations with British politics and culture that led to a fading sense of loyalty, as Nigel, a retired Briton with a Thai wife and young child reflects here.

“...The UK I grew up in and loved has changed over my lifetime and I don’t feel it’s my country anymore...I look at the country and think what are you doing to my country. This is an old man talking now.”

Nigel’s loyalty to Britain as a nation and as home is depleted through a loss of ‘the Britain I used to know’. He has little desire to rebuild or reconnect with a home in Britain, as if it has been ‘left behind in another time’ (Jansen and Staffan Lofving, 2009 cited in Brickell, 2012:230). As Blunt (2005) notes ‘an antipathy towards nostalgia reflects a more pervasive and long-established “suppression of home”, whereby spaces of home are located in the past rather than the present, in imaginative rather than material terms, and as points of imagined authenticity rather than as lived experience’ (cited Blunt and Dowling, 2006:213). This ‘unproductive nostalgia’ is manifest in Nigel’s narrative and leaves little to memorialise about Britain as home (Blunt, 2005).

Interestingly, recently arrived LMs express a more ‘productive’ type of nostalgia to denigrate Britain, one that is oriented towards the present and the future as well as the past (Blunt, 2005). Patrick moved to Hua Hin in 2012 upon retirement with his Thai wife and teenage son. He forecasts the potential life chances for his son in Thailand versus Britain, citing high youth unemployment and a lack of social mobility as reasons to find alternative opportunities outside national borders.

“We’ve been coming here a long time, we’ve got friends here and Britain was getting worse and worse. We had Europe saying we’ve got to do this while they weren’t doing it themselves. Immigrants coming all the time, ok I’m an immigrant now but people just walking over the borders, taking all the cheap jobs, de-valuing jobs. My son, I don’t think he would have got a job...There’s no future at all for him in the UK. When he came he was 50/50, didn’t know whether to stay forever. Since he’s got here he’s been saying he doesn’t want to go back to the UK. He’s still got that option, he’s got a British passport if he wants to. He can now see how much better off he is. He works here for virtually nothing, but he’s happier working here than he is in England”.

The pessimistic forecast of Britain holding ‘no future’ for their children is a common feature of lifestyle migrant narratives (Knowles, 2005; O'Reilly, 2000). These accounts portray a move abroad as a form of knowledgeable escape, justified through comparative lifestyle shopping to source a better quality of life. This process has been conceptualised as highly individual and based on a combination of personal aspiration and choice, or as Knowles (2005, p.97) suggests ‘a knit-your-own-world global citizen’. In some respects Patrick’s forecast has arguably been influenced by received ideas about Britain, such as popular political commentary on immigration, welfare and tax. However, there is also a real material experience of disadvantage, youth unemployment, redundancy, unemployment due to job

cuts, wage and pension freezes that is being drawn upon. For more recent arrivals, the impact of the global economic crisis is a key motivation for moving to Thailand. Thailand is perceived to be outside of this realm of crisis, holding its own in an otherwise risky and uncertain economic climate. As such it is perceived to offer the promise of a secure and comfortable home in direct contrast to Britain.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to a broad range of literatures on lifestyle and retirement migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; King et al., 2000; Oliver, 2007) and the relational geographies of home (Blunt and Dowling, 2006) by emphasising the sedentary homing practices of retired lifestyle migrants engaged in transnational migration (cf. Ralph and Staeheli, 2011). I argue that retired LM's experience diminished transnationalism in the context of ageing abroad through the construction of new homes for retirement, practices of integration and the formation of new relationships that contribute to a sense of belonging in Thailand. At the same time, emotional detachment from Britain as a home space is manifest through dwindling return visits and fading loyalties in the context of changing social, political and cultural landscapes. I have demonstrated that the dual process of retirement and migration is often motivated by lifestyles that nurture emplacement in particular locales and the process of ageing brings about new challenges and the potential for ill health compel older people to make different decisions for mobility and transnational living. This is not to say that all ties to Britain are relinquished but that the circuits of transnationalism diminish as local networks scatter and family dynamics alter, through migration to other countries, estrangement, or bereavement. While transnational practices (communicative and mediatised) are still part of many migrants' everyday life, transnational loyalties and emotional attachments to 'homelands' or 'transnational communities' are less evident, as is the establishment of meaningful 'pluri-local' networks of home (Burrell, 2003; Portes, 1997; Rouse, 1991). However, for those who have fewer material and emotional ties to Britain, it still features as the relational Other, evoking nostalgias and a comparative frame for their migration biography suggesting that while diminished transnational identification lingers on through this narrative. The meaning of home is re-worked in this comparative context and through strategic decisions about retirement abroad, based on priorities for health, wellbeing and care relationships. For many, this involves letting go, emotionally and materially, of connections to Britain and building new relational geographies of home in Thailand (cf. Blunt and Dowling, 2005). Rethinking transnationalism for older migrants, then, involves exploring how mobility and sedentarism intersect (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011) at this point in the lifecourse, paying particular attention to the differentiated (classed, gendered and familial) opportunities and limitations that emerge through ageing and retirement abroad.

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ⁱ Whilst it is possible to claim a UK pension in Thailand, there is no social security agreement between Thailand and the UK. This means the annual index-linked increases are not paid effectively freezing the pension amount upon emigration.

ⁱⁱ Sriskandarajah and Drew (2006) estimate that there are approximately 51,000 British residents in Thailand. This figure includes business expatriates and may well exclude those who use Thailand as a second home.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1998 Thailand introduced the 'Non-immigrant O-A Long-stay Visa for a Retired Person' for foreigners over 50 years old who have a minimum of 800,000 baht to bring into Thailand. The visa allows a three month initial visit and then the foreign resident is required to annually renew their visa to stay in Thailand.

^{iv} Also, land can be purchased through a 30 year leasehold agreement or through a Thai spouse. Recently however the Thai state has cracked down on the purchase of land through 'nominee ownership' and rewards of up to 20% of land value is being offered for any information about illegal ownership of land by foreigners and penalties for lawyers and consultants who aid the sale.

^v Owned by TESCO