

Master's Thesis:
Off the Beaten Track: Lifestyle Migration in Rural Isaan



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Abstract

The thesis aims to give an insight into the ‘lifestyle migrations’ of Western men migrating to Isaan, the rural north-eastern region of Thailand.

Perceptions of men migrating to Thailand are often negative, often assumed to be for the purpose of transnational marriage between an older man and a much younger Thai woman. However, previous research on the relationships between the local Isaan women and Western men to be nuance. Further, Western men have been previously reported to be experiencing social isolation in their home countries, cited as a major reason for choosing to migrate.

By drawing on life course histories of interviews collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in and around the town of Udon Thani as well as online, through expatriate Facebook groups, I attempt to explore these claims further through the lens of ‘lifestyle migration’. Using ‘practice theory as a broad framework to organise and understand these migrations together with ‘lifestyle migration’ and ‘gender’ theory, I draw attention to the factors relevant *prior* to migration. Following this I explore how these experiences influence interviewees’ lives in Isaan afterwards, in their pursuit of a “better life”.

My main observations found that lifestyle migrants in Isaan presented a complex picture in regard to why they ‘chose’ to migrate. However, common among all interviewees was a perceived feeling of ‘social exclusion’ back home that stemmed from a breakdown in relationships with family and friends. This led to migrants building strong community ties in Isaan and stressing the importance of the family and friends they had made post migration. Further, this was often described as specific to the region, due to its ‘rural’ surroundings and contrasted with other tourist areas of the country such as Pattaya and Bangkok.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Emigration to Thailand is not a particularly surprising proposition for most in the West, especially in regard to Western men. Some may think of Thailand as country for retiring in the sun, but more notorious are stories of Western men moving to find romance, often with a much younger Thai woman. Despite these tropes being well established in the general public's imagination, both in Thailand and the West, relatively little has been researched on this particular group of migrants, especially in regard to the events that initiate such a migration and the goings on of their lives afterwards. Indeed, the men focussed on in this thesis have chosen to live a life away from the usual tourist hot spots of Thailand's coast, in favour of a 'quieter' and more 'authentic' life. Such a choice seems, in part, to be based upon experiences of social exclusion, economically and socially prior to leaving that has led to feelings of disillusionment and resentment towards the West, as well as an attempt to achieve a greater sense of meaning in their lives. In the broader picture this thesis adds to the literature on global processes between Thailand and the West, more specifically transnational marriage, orientalism and gendered constructions of masculinity in transnational spaces.

The following chapter will give an overview of the relevant literature relating to migration to Thailand. It will outline the research aims and then introduce the concept of tourism, lifestyle migration and the field of study (Isan) which set the scene for the remainder of the thesis.

Research aims

Focussing on the factors at play prior to the migration - based on ethnographic data taken from one of the few studies conducted in the region on Western men (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016) - I seek to explore further, feelings of social isolation expressed among Western men living in the region to help better understand why such migrations occur. I therefore ask two major questions:

- 1) What are the driving factors for Western men *before* leaving their home countries for Thailand, Isaan?
- 2) How do these previous experiences shape their initial expectations of Isaan, and how do they go forward once arriving, creating their 'new lives'?

In asking these questions I hope that the experiences of these men can add to the wider literature of lifestyle migration and further, add nuance to instances of emigration to Thailand from the West.

Chapter 2: Migrating to Thailand – from tourist to lifestyle migrant

In beginning to understand Western men's eventual migration to Thailand, Isaan I have split this chapter into two halves. The first, giving a background to the topics of tourism and lifestyle migration, relevant to understanding the broader picture of migration from the 'developed' to 'developing' world. The second half of the chapter will then give the context to the group of Western men living in Isaan and a review of the small body of research existing this group of men.

Tourism

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) describes tourism as:

“a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which imply tourism expenditure (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2008).

Perhaps the two most preeminent scholars on the subject Nelson. H. H. Graburn and Erik Cohen began to take tourism as a serious field of research in the late 1960's (King 2018). Both saw the pursuit of tourism as a form of novelty steeped in ritual (Cohen 1972, Graburn 1977), Graburn describing it as a means to “embellish and add meaning to [humans] lives.” (1977, p. 15). Cohen noted, as stated above, that the increase in tourism came about due to developments in communication technology and parallel developments in transportation that allowed a degree of safety and comfort as well as a connection to home - concluding that tourism was a phenomenon that arose from, “a degree of novelty with a degree, of familiarity.” (1972, p. 167). The tourist is perhaps best described as a person that *temporarily* visits a place away from the familiar and 'everyday' to experience a change i.e. a holiday (Smith 1977). Within anthropology this break or separation from the familiar has often been understood as a modern-day ritual, likened to religious pilgrimages. Graburn (1983) characterises the holiday as having three distinct stages:

“ [The holiday] has a beginning, a period of separation characterized by “travel away from home:” a middle period of limited duration, to experience a “change” in the non-ordinary place: and an end, a return to

the home and the workaday. Thus the structure of tourism is basically identical with the structure of all ritual behaviour.” (1983, p. 12)

Liminality

In understanding tourism as ritual, and particularly focussing on the “middle period” the break from the everyday and “non-ordinary” i.e. the holiday, Graburn (ibid) saw tourism as a “liminal” experience, drawing from earlier work of Victor Turner (1969) on the concept of liminality.

Liminality, originally coined by Van Gennep (1909) but later developed further by Turner, highlights the middle phase of a ritual, the in-between stage of a “transition from one social status to another” (Wels, et al. 2011, p. 1). Importantly, during this transition individuals are understood to be both “neither here nor there” when it comes to the everyday, the regular laws, customs and conventions that would otherwise govern their behaviour temporarily set in stasis (Turner 1969). When applying liminality to tourism Graburn (1983) noted how this phase of liminality often leads to a reversal of values, where individuals may act quite the opposite to what they would otherwise, had they been at home. Upon returning home at the end of the holiday such values are returned to. The ritual summer holiday for many northern European tourists that visit the Mediterranean every year is a prime example of this. In the liminal space of the summer holiday, these individuals have become infamous as tourists among the local inhabitants for drinking excessively, beyond their regular habits, to the point of causing damage and distress to their holiday destinations (BBC 2019). Of course, this departure from the everyday does not necessarily take the form of such a destructive subversion of regular habits. Experiences ranging from trying new kinds of foods or visiting cultural sites and museums that would otherwise not be visited at home to bungee jumping or backpacking could all be seen as a liminal experience that upend the usual practices individuals take part in their everyday lives.

Authenticity and Thailand

In understanding the tourist experience as liminal I am suggesting it as a departure from the norm. Just what such a departure describes however can be different from person to person as noted above. Cohen (1972) began to categorise such experiences into various types of tourists. His four categories: The “organized mass tourist”, the “individual mass tourist”, the “explorer”

and the “drifter” in short, describe the degree to which these tourists interact with the host nation and its inhabitants, from “least to most adventurous” (Cohen 1972, p. 168).

I mention this categorisation as it touches on an important concept within tourism especially in the context of Thailand—*authenticity*. The idea of an “authentic” experience, something closer to Cohen’s description of the explorer or the drifter, who “travel off the beaten path” has become increasingly important for tourists, especially in the context of Thailand. Andrew Johnson (2007) demonstrates this well in his article “*Authenticity, Tourism, and Self-discovery in Thailand: Self-creation and the Discerning Gaze of Trekkers and Old Hands*” by drawing attention to the Tourist Authority of Thailand’s (TAT) shift in rhetoric through the launch of a new advertisement in 2001. In brief, the advertisement follows the experiences of a sombre looking robot who, travelling through iconic tourist sites of Thailand – a night club, a floating market, a Buddhist temple and finally meeting group of Thai people in a misty forest – suddenly becomes a young white man, a single tear running down his cheek. In his interpretation Johnson sees the advert as an attempt by TAT to cast a holiday in Thailand as an authentic experience, exemplified through the robot’s transformation. This transformation, he explains, suggests an opportunity for “self-discovery” a place to reconnect with ourselves and find what is missing in our automated Western lives (Johnson 2007, p. 154). Furthermore, although not describing it himself as liminal, such journeys of self-discovery are undoubtedly so, exemplified in the quote from Johnson below.

“When on vacation, the tourist is seeking a break from the constrictions that everyday life places upon him: the tourist, when touring, is searching for an alternate identity that can, upon a return home, be reincorporated into the self, thereby offering transcendence.” (Johnson 2007, p. 155)

Such instances of finding oneself and connecting with something “authentic” are not unusual to holidays in Thailand, despite experiences varying widely (ibid).

Lifestyle migration

As the term might suggest, rather than a bookended experience such as a holiday, lifestyle migration describes a more definite departure from the ordinary in the pursuit of a ‘*lifestyle*’.

Like tourism, lifestyle migration combines the familiar with the novel, in the search of a “better way of life”, often seeking a high degree of novelty, or “authenticity” as it is often referred to in lifestyle migration literature (Salazar 2014).

As was the case with the study of tourism, lifestyle migration was initially met with much scepticism (K. O'Reilly 2000). It is now a growing area of research within migration studies, particularly useful in highlighting migration flows that are often invisible, in part due to Westerners' self-described status as expatriates (Maher and Lafferty 2014, p. 429). In doing so research has been useful in revealing patterns of Western migration that underline Western privilege and post-colonialism (Benson and O'Reilly 2018) as well as issues relating to class (Hoey 2005), and gender (Jaisuekun and Sunanta 2016).

To some extent, the term lifestyle migrant is interchangeable with “expatriate”. Research on lifestyle migration is therefore often characterised by the flow of migration from the “developed” to “developing” world. Such migrations are strongly facilitated by the increasing ease of migration through improvements in travel and communications technology as well as neo-colonial privileges afforded to those living in the West (Benson and O'Reilly 2018). Furthermore, lifestyle migration often handles migrants that move to relatively affluent and luxurious destinations (Hoey 2005). Such examples can be seen in the migration of Westerners from North to Central and South America (Hayes 2014) as well as Northern Europeans moving to Southern Europe - most notable Spain's Costa del Sol (K. O'Reilly 2000) and the South of France (M. Benson 2012) - and further afield with British retirees in Australia (Warnes 2001). These migrants are thought to move for a variety of reasons, including work, climate, and a cheaper cost of living. A major reason given by many is “health and wellbeing”. Although such a term can be broad in its interpretation it highlights the so called “consumptive desires” (Benson and O'Reilly 2016) that are integral to the understanding of lifestyle migration and perhaps deviate from more commonly understood labour driven interpretations of the migration. This will be discussed further in the theory section later in the thesis.

Research regarding lifestyle migration to Asia and Thailand has been relatively understudied compared to the European and American continents (Howard 2009). However, just over half of Westerners migrating to Thailand are thought to be retirees, along with a number that come with “expat jobs”, teach English or work in the aid sector (ibid). It is difficult to pin down exact figures of expats living in Thailand, however, Howard (2009) estimated figures of expats living in Thailand to be around 100,000 in the mid 2000's. It should be noted here that these figures

are somewhat dated now and further, that obtaining a permanent residence status in the country has become much harder over the past year as the government has clamped down on the requirements to stay, leading to a large number of Western expatriates to leave (BBC 2019). Conducting an online survey of 1003 Westerners, currently or formerly living in Thailand for at least one year, Howard (2009) found motivations for emigrating for a range of reasons; from the cost of living and the climate to a dislike of their home nation and an admiration of the Thai way of life, as well as the availability and attractiveness of Thai women. Further, many had visited the country previously on holiday before choosing to live permanently in Thailand.

Moving on from the broader topics relevant to the thesis, the following sections will give a background to the region of Isaan, the people that live there and the Western men emigrating there.

Why Isaan and Western men?

My interest in Isaan began with my own experiences living in Thailand. After finishing my undergraduate degree in anthropology, I did what many in England do and took a “gap year”, with my girlfriend at the time (now wife), who had been working as an English teacher in Norway. I chose to go to Thailand inspired by friends I’d made whilst working in a Thai restaurant. Through these friends and my wife’s experience as a teacher, we managed to get ourselves a job teaching English in a small city called Phitsanulok. Situated in the centre of the country, it was far from the big city life of Bangkok to the south. Life was slow and the living costs were cheap, an experience that contrasted strongly with what I had experienced back in England. Through this experience I gained a somewhat different perspective to Thailand than what most may assume a gap year in Thailand to be, i.e. beach resorts, clubbing and tuk tuk rides. As a consequence, from the beginning of my masters I had wanted to create a project involving Thailand, and after much deliberation came to decide that focussing on Western migrants living in the country was best, mainly because I do not speak Thai and already had a degree of insight into living in Thailand as a Westerner. Originally, I had wanted to research sex tourism in Thailand to explore Western masculinity, as in contrast to my own experiences it seemed to both dominate mainstream media depictions of Western men in Thailand as well as much of the academic research. Geographically the majority of the research was centred in and around Bangkok, Chiang Mai and the larger tourist contact zones along the coast, such as



Figure 1: Map displaying the region of Isaan (taken from Wikipedia and adapted. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaan#/media/File:Thailand_Isan.png 03/1019 13:10)

Phuket and Pattaya. However, as my own experiences had led me to live in a small, relatively unknown area of the country for Westerners, I was intrigued to find out if any research had been done in the rural countryside of Thailand. This led me to Isaan.

Living outside of the larger cities such as Bangkok, Phuket and Chiang Mai, the expat community in Isaan is one of the largest in rural Thailand, a few hours east of where I had previously lived. As is with estimates for Westerners in Thailand as a whole, the population estimates of Westerners living in the Isaan are difficult to find as no exact count exists. However, numbers are thought to be in the tens of thousands, albeit in small and spread out pockets (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016, p. 53) and further, the community appears to be exclusively male (ibid, Maher and Lafferty 2014, Lapanun 2012). Although research on the region is still relatively sparse, especially in relation

to the lives of Western migrants, one of the most extensive articles “From Sex Tourist, to Son-in-Law” by Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016) provided in depth ethnographic research that was the inspiration for much of this thesis, connecting both my interest in rural Thailand, sex tourism and masculinity and social welfare issues. In brief, the authors’ findings reveal feelings of social exclusion among Western men from their home countries, which led in part to their emigration.

The research from this article will be returned to in the final section of this chapter. First, however, I would like to take a step back from Isaan to give some context of Western men in Thailand more generally as well as some background to the region of Isaan and the women living there.

The Broader context: Transnational marriages and emigrating to Thailand

As I am focussing on Western men in Thailand the topic of transnational marriage, i.e. a marriage between a Westerner and a Thai national in this instance, is of relevance. As stated

earlier, such marriages are often assumed when talk of living or migrating to Thailand is mentioned in the West. Indeed, in the background research all of the men involved in the studies had Thai partners (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2018, 2016, Lapanun and Thompson, 2018, Lapanun, 2012, Sunanta and Angeles 2013, Howard 2009, 2008, L. Angeles 2009, Esara, , 2009) and in my own experience it was uncommon to meet a Western man living in Thailand without a Thai partner. With the assumption of a transnational marriages/relationship often comes a degree of scepticism or even infamy as to the motives of those involved. Such perceptions are often reinforced and generalised by cases reported on in the public media that make the headlines for their extreme circumstances. The Guardian (2008) for example, posted a story where a man was killed by his Thai wife after moving to a small village in Isaan. Equally horrifying was the story of Thai women imprisoned and trafficked by their Western husbands upon arrival in the West (Bangkok Post 2017). In Thailand negative perceptions of Western men especially with wives from Isaan are widespread among the upper classes (L. Angeles 2009). Western men are often cast as the “loser guy” unattractive and unable to find love, their Thai wives as promiscuous and out for money.

Despite this general perception, the literature on the transnational marriages does not suggest such a sinister picture. That is not to say there are not genuine reasons for concern over some of these relationships, especially in relation to the extreme cases raised by the media above. Such cases are extreme however, and often highlighted to capture the attention of the general public but are hardly representative of the general demographic of transnational couples. The problematic effects such representations of transnational relationships create is perhaps best exemplified by Nicole Constable in her book “Romance on a Global Stage” (2003). For Constable such extreme cases, written about in the media, lead to unfounded assumptions of “a singularly oppressed category of victimized women who are “trafficked” and in need of rescue” and further lead to assumptions of complicity in wider sex tourism practices for the men involved. Her own pioneering research through online dating forums for transnational couples provides a far more nuanced picture of transnational relationships revealing it to be a product of intersectional factors such as class, nationality and race. When looking at such relationships Constable states, “*Rather than view women as simply dominated by men, attention is paid to more complex and subtle articulations of power, as well as to the way in which institutions and processes (such as immigration and citizenship) may be engendered.*”

With this in mind I seek to provide nuance to the transnational relationships discussed for the men involved in this thesis. However, in doing so I acknowledge that the perspectives of Isaan women are clearly missing from the story, although given by proxy through their Western husband at times. Consequently, As such, I will try to give some context to Isaan women's position in this globalised process by giving a review of the relevant literature on the subject.

The perspective of Isaan women: Daughters with duties

Historically an agricultural region, Isaan has provided for itself through farming up until relatively recently. With industrial developments over the last four decades however, and notable policy changes favouring tourism as a major source of income there has been an unequal distribution of wealth across the country, benefitting those living in Bangkok and the more tourist centred regions of the country (Angeles and Sunanta 2009, p. 560). This has resulted in the region's youth (especially women) migrating to the larger towns and cities such as Bangkok to find work (Sunanta and Angeles, From rural life to transnational wife: agrarian transition, gender mobility, and intimate globalization in transnational marriages in northeast Thailand 2013). For many this has led to work in the sex tourism industry, due in part to poor levels of education and negative perceptions towards darker skin tones and the Isan dialect, that create substantial social barriers to Isaan women finding work in the rest of the country (Esara 2009).

Further compounding the issue are cultural practices and gendered norms dubbed "daughter duties" that have been shown to be significant in facilitating transnational marriages (L. Angeles 2009). To summarise, what such duties entail relate to matrilineal practices that position women as the head of the household in Isaan (Angeles and Sunanta 2009). Holding such a position means that Isaan women (the daughters) are responsible for the wellbeing of the family, expected to take care of raising their children and caring for their parents. Such expectations extend beyond caregiving however, reaching further into economical realms, as these women also often manage their family farm or business (Angeles and Sunanta 2009). Isaan men for their part are expected to pay tribute to their family by becoming a monk at some point in their lives, as well as paying remittances from their wages to the wife's family (ibid). As the region is matrilineal, the daughter is also tasked with finding a husband to be brought into the fold of the family through marriage. To some extent this means that finding a husband with a good job is desirable as they can bring more money into the family. However, reasons for finding a Western husband go beyond purely economic ones as research by Lapanun (2012) has shown. Through conceptualising what she has termed the "logics of desire", Lapanun

describes how multiple factors are at work in bringing together these transnational couples, their stories far more nuanced than explanations that point simply to money (much as Constable 2003 suggests). For one, opinions of Isaan men – true or not – are often negative. Many Isaan women (especially those with Western husbands) described bad experiences in the past with Isaan men, who, did not work, often drank excessively, and would cheat on them (ibid, Lapanun and Thompson 2018).

As a result, foreign men, especially from the West, are increasingly thought of as being good husbands; seen as kind and caring, often willing to help with caregiving and work in the family business as well as being able to support their partners financially. This is conflated with perceived ideas of ‘modernity’ among Isaan women with Western men that is again strongly contrasted to perceptions of the local Isaan men (Sunanta and Angeles 2013). As for the Western men, Lapanun (2012) suggests their motivations are “*shaped by a gendered stereotyping of Thai (Asian) women associated with the role of home-making wives embracing traditional family values on the one hand and gender relations in Western societies influenced by feminist ideas on the other.*” (p, 24).

The final section of this chapter will address the literature on the transnational marriages and Western men in Isaan and explore further what their motivations may be.

Western men in Thailand: Migrations, motivations and marriages

The focus of this thesis is not transnational marriages between Western men and their Isaan partners. Rather, I am focussing on the ‘motivations’ or ‘choices’ to migrate from the West to Thailand, Isaan from the perspective of lifestyle migration, and therefore primarily looking at it within the broader context of migration. However, as has been mentioned in the previous sections, transnational marriage is clearly an important factor in exploring the experiences of these men and what may have led them to live in Isaan. It is a common assumption, both in the West and Thailand, that when emigrating to Thailand a Western man will be moving for or intend to find himself a Thai partner. Furthermore, as will be discussed shortly, the academic literature suggests that settling down in Isaan is strongly linked to finding a Thai partner (Maher and Lafferty 2014, Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016). In this final section I will therefore outline the small but growing body of literature on Western men living in the region to give some background as to why these men may choose to emigrate and how this relates to their relationships with their Thai partners.

Two major factors appear to be important in facilitating a life in Isaan for Western men.

The first is the neo-colonial privileges that the status of a white migrant man from the West is afforded, described by Maher and Lafferty (2014). Here the authors clearly outline, through ethnographic research, how Western men would experience an initial increase in status compared with their lives back home, especially in relation to their gendered identity as a man. Such experiences were intricately interwoven with ideas of romance, especially in regard to hegemonic ideals of masculinity that many of the men described as being marginalised by previously, due to “class, age, body type, or physical appearance.” (ibid., p. 435). Building off of cultural norms from their own countries these men are thus better able to ‘perform’ hegemonic masculine roles, especially that of the ‘player’ and the ‘provider’ or patriarch of the family (p. 435).

Importantly though, the authors find that these privileges were not mobile, meaning that their constructions of masculine identity were only specific to the tourist centres of Thailand and Isaan or on an even more minute level to the expat bars and clubs (Maher & Lafferty, 2014, p. 428). The implications of this created new barriers over time for these men as they face both social and financial constraints in returning to their home countries, as well as to integrating into the local society outside of the white western masculine identity they performed. Thus, the authors show the lives of Western expats living in the area to be paradoxical, enabled by privilege but later facing constraints that are to some degree caused by it.

Missing from the analysis of Western men’s experiences on their journey to settling in Isaan, however, is an understanding of the matrilineal and matrilineal practices discussed above. Here I return to the Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016) article mentioned earlier in the chapter as in many ways it gives the other half of the story to the research on Isaan women and their Western husbands, focussing on what they describe as the “son-in-law”, i.e. the Western husband of the Isaan women.

In reference to the neo-colonial privileges that Maher and Lafferty (2014) find, by adding the extra dimension of local cultural practices they are able to further explore how these hegemonic masculine roles are being performed. In short, the authors suggest that for many of the men living in Isaan - especially for those that may have engaged in or identified as a sex tourist - the strong family practices that govern Isaan life provided a way to move from the “fraught spaces of tourist contact zones to more settled lives in the countryside as in-married sons-in-law.” (p. 57). Sex tourism and the role of the ‘player’ described by Maher and Lafferty are thus

seen as part of a liminal phase for many in Isaan, that is resolved in part by marrying into an Isaan family through their partners, to become the son-in-law or the provider.

Focussing mainly on this transition however, often from Bangkok or the largest tourist centres to Isaan, the study is lacking in data as to the experiences of these men prior to their arrival in Thailand. Shedding some light on this though, the authors do note that many described feelings of social exclusion in their home countries, leading in part to their emigration, highlighted in the quote below:

“the [Western] men in Isan overwhelmingly report past experiences of personal isolation “back home,” due to failed marriages, children leaving home, working-class subalternity, and a general feeling that social change, especially though not only with respect to gender relations, has produced societies in which they no longer have a place. (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016, p. 61)

Isaan, was consequently seen as a place “...where they have finally settled after long, unsettled, often lonely lives...” (ibid, p. 61). Whether or not these feelings of contentment with Isaan were long lived is perhaps debatable as Maher and Lafferty (2014) have suggested. I take this as a point of departure for the rest of the thesis, in identifying a need to focus on the experiences of men prior to leaving for Thailand and exploring perceived feelings of social exclusion expressed among men in the region.

Conclusion and outline of the thesis

This chapter has outlined the main body of literature relevant to the study of lifestyle migrant men in Isaan. It has given a background to the topic of tourism, which plays a large role in facilitating lifestyle migrations, many taking holidays to the countries they later choose to settle in. Further, the term ‘*lifestyle migrant*’ has been shown to be analogous to that of expatriate, yet better capable of explaining the, often invisible, migration flow of Western migrants from “developed” to “developing countries”. It is for this reason I am choosing to adopt the concept when focussing on the group of men emigrating to Isaan. The literature on these men and Isaan, suggest that neo-colonial privileges as well as local matrilineal and matrilineal practices are both playing large roles in facilitating the migration. Further, research on men in the area has suggested that past experiences of social exclusion relating to gender and class have also played a part in their migration to Thailand in general, if not Isaan specifically. This has not yet been

fully explored however, and thus presents a noticeable gap in the literature that I hope to add to with this thesis.

The rest of thesis is outlined as followed:

Chapter two will introduce the relevant lifestyle migration as a theoretical perspective as well as practice theory, life course perspectives and gender that are seen as relevant to Western men's migration to Isaan. Chapter three will outline the methods and ethical considerations of the thesis. Chapter four addresses factors relevant before migration through life course histories and also introduces the concept of social risk management. Following this, chapter five outlines the online interactions of interviewees to explore how these lifestyle migrant men construct their lives post migration. Finally, the findings and analysis Chapters five will draw on bring these experiences together to give a fuller understanding of lifestyle migrations to Isaan, using the framework of practice theory outlined in chapter two.

Chapter 3: Theoretical perspectives

As noted in the introduction an overarching theme throughout this thesis is the social practice of lifestyle migration. As such, the following chapter will give an overview of the significant theories and concepts relevant to the practices of lifestyle migration. Following the work of Karen O'Reilly (2012) in her application of lifestyle migration, 'practice theory' will be used as an underlying framework to better organise the complex nature of migration. In adopting practice theory the thesis seeks to focus upon social practices as the products of three main analytical levels: 1) Institutional structures (the macro level), 2) social actors' own thoughts and actions (the micro level), and 3) drivers, facilitators of or hurdles against lifestyle migrants that interact and operate on a middle plain such as social networks, organised civil society and the family (the meso level). To capture these practices, I adopt and outline a theory of life-course perspective to map how the lives of interviewees have evolved over time. In other words, to examine how the agents' actions at Time 1 influenced their scope for agency and pursuing the life they want for themselves at Time 2. Finally, as the thesis is focussing solely upon men the chapter will also outline a theory of gender and masculinity, which can be further incorporated into the broader theoretical framework of practice theory. In bringing these theoretical perspectives together, I hope to be better able to interpret Western men's migration to Isaan and further help and identify factors relevant to 'everyday' for these men after they have settled down.

Lifestyle migration

'Lifestyle migration' as a concept has developed from the work of numerous authors over the last two decades (Hoey 2005, O'Reilly and Benson 2009, Salazar 2014, Botterill 2016). Although broad in its definition, it is useful in its ability to give a more nuanced understanding of what migration might mean to those who stand in a privileged position to *choose* to migrate. "Choice" in the context of migration here is a key concept that sets lifestyle migrants apart from other forms of migration, such as the more labour or force driven constructions that are commonly focussed upon. As Hoey (2005) puts it,

"For life-style migrants, the choice made of where to live is consciously, intentionally also one about how to live" (p. 615).

In the context of the thesis, Isaan – a rural region of Thailand – sets the scene for such choice.

As noted in the introduction, the drivers behind such a migration can be for a variety of factors but are taken in order to change one's lifestyle in one or more ways. By using such a definition of migration, the apparent 'free choice' that lifestyle migrants utilize in the pursuit of a 'way of life' can be seen as central in understanding motivations as migrants can

"approach migration as a form of consumption in contrast to the production orientation attributed to most other migration flows" (Benson and O'Reilly 2016, p. 26).

In other words, meaning can be interpreted through consumptive desires and further

"understanding the motivations and meanings of migration provides insights into the lives the migrants envisage leading following migration and into the lives they try to live" (Benson and O'Reilly 2016, p. 30).

Moreover, by choosing to leave their home country in the "search for a better life" it is often also inferred that lifestyle migrants' previous lifestyles are something to be left behind. Although moving back may occur for some, in making the decision to emigrate, such a choice should entail *resettlement*. Salazar (2014, p. 119) describes such a resettlement as often being triggered or preceded by 'turning points' in lifestyle migrants' lives that often relate to

"event[s] either in the personal sphere (e.g., divorce, disease or death of a loved one) or professional sphere (e.g., redundancy or retirement)."

Lifestyle migration is therefore understood as a 'transformative process', undertaken by those seeking change something in their old lives and native countries. In doing so lifestyle migrants are said to attribute a degree of symbolism upon their migration through so called "sociocultural imaginaries" that relate to presupposed ideas about the country they are migrating to (Salazar 2014, p. 120). Informing sociocultural imaginaries are 'lifestyle intermediaries' that constitute a broad range of mediums that promote lifestyle (Benson and O'Reilly 2018, p. 90). These may take the shape of *"travel writing, guide books, information leaflets, blogs about living abroad, Internet fora, and location-specific"* (ibid.).

Previous research on Western men living in Isaan raises some interesting questions as to how and what these sociocultural imaginaries may consist of (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016, 2018). As mentioned in the previous chapter, much of the lifestyle migration literature focusses on the movement of people in search of a "better way of life" that often entails a degree of luxury and comfort. As Howard (2009, p. 194) points out though, Thailand is unusual in this respect as it does not boast the same standard of living as other lifestyle

migration, such as those living along the Mediterranean, for example. Despite the cheap cost of living, many men living in Isaan described in the literature (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016, 2018, Sunanta and Angeles 2013) as well as my own interviewees lived in small, houses with their Thai partner and family, situated away from the main towns, which in some cases had limited space and access to Western conveniences such as air conditioning. Further, although for those above the age of fifty a permanent residence visa was available, for those younger work can be difficult to find, and even after a visa status is attained it must be renewed every twelve months, making residential status in Thailand precarious (Jaisuekun and Sunanta 2016, p. 101). As discussed previously, the employment rate in Isaan is relatively low for Thai people, let alone Western migrants, as the region has seen mass immigration to Bangkok from Isan (Angeles and Sunanta 2009, p. 561). For those moving to Isaan that continue to work, it may be difficult to understand why such a migration would be undertaken given the circumstances. Despite this, there seems to continue to be a steady flow of Western men migrating to Isaan (although admittedly in much fewer numbers than those to the bigger cities), so it seems pertinent to ask, what is it that draws them there? Or to bring it back to the theory, how has the transformative process of lifestyle migration been influenced by the motivations, meanings and experiences of these men leading them to emigrate to Isaan?

In answering I refer to the work of Karen O'Reilly (2012), who in close collaboration with Rob Stones (2005) has developed a sociological 'practice theory' of migration. Through this theoretical framework, so called 'practice stories' are developed with the wider literature relevant to the study - in this case lifestyle migration and gender – that considers both the wider global, transnational and institutional forces at play as much as it does individual choices in the process of migration. In this sense practice theory acknowledges the dialectic relationship between structure and agency and conceptualises it as an 'interactional' process between the two in order to explain the motivations, meanings and experiences of lifestyle migrants.

Practice theory

“Practice theories attempt to understand the interaction and interconnection of structure and agency, first by opposing the notion of a strict ontological dualism” (O'Reilly 2012, p. 15).

In this section I will describe practice theory in greater detail in order to demonstrate its use in understanding lifestyle migration, as well as incorporating other theoretical perspectives into the equation. First however I will give a brief outline of the concepts of structure and agency.

Structure

In a broad sense social structures here are taken to be ,

“more or less enduring organizations of social (including economic and political) relations and cultural formations” (Morawska 2011, p. 4).

Their defining essence is in their ability to constrain and enable the social actor. Further, and of particular relevance to migration, such structures are seen to be threefold in scope, ranging from the global to regional and finally the local level (ibid). I take the position - in line with relatively recent arguments in the structure/agency debate (Morawska 2011, O'Reilly 2012, Stones, Botterill, et al. 2018) - that social structures are more or less mutable and thus subject to change over time and furthermore, into the future (this will be discussed in more detail later). Finally, social structures can be described as constituting a multiplicity of characteristics and having varying purposes (Morawska 2011, p. 5). Their ability to constrain or enable is therefore defined by such characteristics.

Agency

Agency in turn denotes the ‘everyday’ interaction with social structures to varying degrees and outcomes (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, Morawska 2011, O'Reilly 2012). I follow closely O'Reilly's (2012, p. 9) definition of active agency - who draws off of the work of “Emirbayer and Mische (1998) – who emphasises three core elements to agency.

Firstly, agency is *habitual*. Building upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus (cf, Bourdieu 1990), the habitual nature of agency describes the influence of past experiences, thoughts and actions of the social actor in shaping their practices in the everyday. Secondly, agency is shaped by *projection*. By this it is meant that agency is continually being reconfigured by our hopes, fears and desires for the future that are based upon “*received structures of thought and action*” (Morawska 2011, p. 5) from society. Finally, they argue that agency is *evaluative*, in that it is dictated by present circumstances that must be weighed against future potential. Anyone of these three elements may be dominant in shaping the agency of a social actor at any given time, and in this way, we see the influence of structures constraining or enabling the

social actor. This power play between agent and structure leads us to understand agency as an interaction between structure and social actor who “(re)define and pursue their purposes, playing with or against different structures.” (Morawska 2011, p. 5). Such a definition concludes that structure and agency are created and continually negotiated in what Morawska (2011, p. 4) defines as a “process of becoming” that will be further expanded on in the discussion below.

Bring the two together through practice

As I mentioned earlier, practice theory acknowledges the dialectic relationship between structure and agency and further, as the quote at the beginning of the practice theory section states, opposes this dualism in an attempt to understand how the two interact. In doing so the theory follows what seems to be a general consensus within the social sciences as to the interactional nature of “social life” between structure and agency i.e. social life is a product of both institutional structures and agentive action.

The foundations of O’Reilly’s conceptualisation of practice theory lie in “structuration theory”, proposed by Anthony Giddens, most notably in his book “The Constitution of Society” (1984) as well as drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory (Bourdieu 1990). Although it has been met with a great deal of criticism since its initial introduction - most notably from Margaret Archer (1982) - the theory has been instrumental in paving the way for conceptualising social practice as a product of both structure and agency. Rob Stones’ (2005) reformulation of structuration theory, ‘strong structuration theory’ strengthens this perspective as importantly, he defines structures as temporal in their nature. In doing so social structures are therefore thought as being *pre-dated* - i.e. they are already in existence before the social actor has had a chance to act – but also able to change in the future (2005, p. 85). Thus, the individual is shown to have a degree of agency and ability to move independently of the constraints set in place by structures, regardless of their pre-dated nature. Succinctly put, structuration theory, as amended in Stones’ strong structuration theory, can be thought of as an attempt to reconcile structure and agency through temporality. In other words, a structure may predate the agent, yet through *interaction* over time both are able to change and even affect future outcomes.

In theorising this interaction between structure and agency in relation to migration O’Reilly incorporates the concept of ‘*emergence*’ (Morawska 2011) into the theory. Emergence here describes both “*structures and agency ‘as a process of becoming’*” (O’Reilly 2012, p. 5). By

this it is meant that *social life is “processual, and the dynamic outcome of the interaction of structure and agency, over time.”* (Benson and O’Reilly 2018, p. 1). In viewing social life in this way, it is useful in being able to understand and describe structures (ibid, p. 5), which better enables us to understand how they may limit and constrain a social actor’s agency. Practice theory is therefore seen as somewhat holistic in its approach, suggested as *“a more general, sociological, theory of how all of social life unfolds through the practice of daily life”* (O’Reilly 2012, p. 30). Further, it attempts to *“understand the broad social processes that are continually involved in the constitution of social life”* (O’Reilly 2012, p. 5) in this case, how meaning, motivations and experiences are shaped in relation for those emigrating to Isaan. Moreover, and importantly to understanding motivations, meanings and experiences of lifestyle migrants, the theory conceptualises migration as a temporal process in line with strong structuration theory (Stones 2005). Outlining migration as a temporal phenomenon is a complex process that pieces together historical and wider structurally influencing factors as well as more proximate phenomenological data from migrants’ lives. Such a process results in practice stories mentioned above. Practice theory therefore seeks to

“...understand various migration trends by piecing together coherent practice stories about them. A practice story understands a series of linked events as a process. It is a complex, sociologically-informed way of understanding phenomena that avoids one-dimensional, static, or narrow explanations.” (O’Reilly 2012, p. 8).

To bring it back to the thesis, for lifestyle migrants the “search for a better life” is thus seen as a ‘process of becoming’ (Morawska 2011), where meanings motivations and experiences that remain central to lifestyle migrations are therefore understood as the interaction between structure and agency used to build practice stories. To better identify how structure and agency are influencing migration O’Reilly’s proposes a “cycle of structuration” (2012, p. 7), that breaks the broader aspects of structure and agency down into more specific factors.

The cycle of structuration

The cycle of structuration consists of four main concepts: external structures, internal structures, practices and outcomes, that seek to organise the phenomenon of migration through the interaction of structure and agency. In doing it breaks this interaction into macro, meso and micro phenomena, explained in the following section.

1) *External structures* - constitute a range of underlying social structures that apply constraints and opportunities upon individuals. In relation to the thesis this refers to the wider global political, historical and economic processes that facilitate and limit lifestyle migrations. This for example includes factors such as visa regulations as well as tourism and lifestyle intermediaries. Such processes are often taken for granted, and migrants may not necessarily perceive the opportunities and limitations that external structures afford or deny them. (O'Reilly 2012, p. 7).

2) *Internal structures* refer to how structures and agency influence 'actions' on an everyday basis. The concept is divided into two separate forms of actions, the first informed by Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1990), and the second by Stones' (2005) concept of conjuncture-specific internal structures. Habitus here is used to describe the social actor's everyday actions as informed by their perception of the world, shaped by their social context and past experiences (2012, p. 8). In other words, their general disposition as Stones (2005, p.87) describes it. Habitus is understood as being

"best conceived as both a structure (formed) and an action (being formed), and it includes the skills, cultural schemas, world views, knowledge, capitals, and personal resources (including those that are embodied) of a given agent or group of agents" (2012, p. 8).

Habitus describes structures *already* formed that dictate our actions in the everyday constitution of social life. This, however, does not allow for new action to emerge. Stones' (2005) suggests conjuncture-specific internal structures as a solution to this, where new and divergent actions are able to emerge in the face of new situations and structures unknown to them. They thus describe at an intermediate level the processual changes between structure and agency described above in specific contexts. Here we are looking at how lifestyle migrant's face the prospect of the unknown, in the form of the social terrain of Isaan, where cultural schemas informed by their own habitus do not necessarily make sense. Therefore, internal structures are understood as a combination of one's general disposition or habitus as well as their positionality within a social context, able to change over time through conjuncture-specific behaviours as it is forced to interact with differing social contexts.

3) *Practices* describe the actions of social actors in their daily life and thus draw attention to the interaction between structure above agency. Practices are said to occur within communities or 'communities of practices' (O'Reilly 2012, p. 9). These communities of practice define the

social context within which we act. This could be for example a workplace, school, or in the case of this thesis, a group of men that meet in a bar on a regular basis in Isaan.

“Communities of practice thus provide the context within which an agent is constrained and enabled...”(ibid) and therefore, “...it involves aspects we might recognise as structures – codes, rules, regulations, procedures – but also implicit understandings, rules of thumb, established sensitivities, shared world views, and underlying assumptions.” (O’Reilly 2012, p. 9).

In recognising that actions can be reflexive and purposive in relation to circumstance (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, O’Reilly 2012), O’Reilly proposes that new social contexts result can lead to ‘conjuncturally-specific external structures’ that allow for change in social actors practices (ibid). Thus, practices are seen of particular importance to the thesis as they describe both how lifestyle migrants may alter previous practices of migrants lives.

4) Finally, ‘*outcomes*’, which simply refer to the product of any one or all three of the above levels acting upon a social actor or society as a whole at a given point in time. Therefore, we cannot say that any one of these levels are more important than the other, but that some may take precedent over others depending on the circumstances an individual is facing. Here we see the differing interactions between structure and agency and how they may create various outcomes.

Trajectories, transformation and turning points during the life course

As the thesis primarily focuses on the social practices (as described above) of lifestyle migrants that are relevant in realizing the consumptive motives of lifestyle migration – both in the routine (habitual) everyday actions and reflexive purposive actions (O’Reilly, 2012; Stones, 2005) – I have chosen to apply life course perspective theory in order to address their experiences leading up to the migration as well as mapping their lives afterwards. In the context of the thesis, I am interested in my interviewees’ experiences of migrating and life as an expat afterwards. To increase our understanding of how and to what extent the actions taken by lifestyle migrants or other actors (and their interactions) at one point (Time 1) influence the same persons’ opportunities for participation and inclusion subsequently (Time 2), it is important for the data to capture what have been described as *trajectories*, *transitions* and *turning points* often cited as the impetus for lifestyle migrations (Salazar 2014, p. 119).

By trajectories, I am referring here to the organisation of particular experiences over the life course of an individual. More specifically these experiences are understood as encompassing the stability and change within an individual's life (George 2009, p. 164). 'Change' among lifestyle migrant lives has been shown to be a major driver in causing the initial migration (ibid) and is therefore seen as an important perspective to consider alongside the other theoretical perspectives. Further, trajectories are conceptualised as both temporal (Sampson and Laub 1993, p. 8), i.e. they are happening over a life span - thus complementing the practice theory literature above, which understands agency as an interactional process with structure happening over time – as well as transitional.

By transitional it is meant that a variety of factors are marked such as education, work and family life (Green 2010, p. 5) that influence such trajectories at various points along a life course trajectory. Such transitional periods proved important to the lifestyle migrants in Isaan I spoke with, particularly in regard to work and family life, that often became the impetus for migrating. Further, retirement was also seen as a transitional period that began interviewees on a particular trajectory towards migrating to Thailand. In some cases, these transitions are seen as happening over a much shorter time span, and thus transitions are understood occurring within trajectories (Sampson and Laub 1993, p. 8). As such, transitions are understood as being part of the larger life course trajectory, and although perhaps momentous in their essence they do not necessarily alter these trajectories in an unexpected direction.

Conversely, *turning points* describe a more dramatic and sometimes unexpected event in a life course trajectory that can drastically alter its direction (Supeno and Bourdon 2013, Holland and Thomson 2009, Merrill and West 2009, Gotlib and Wheaton 1997), setting them apart from transitions in an important way. Among my informants' events such as divorce, taking drugs, such dramatic events and will be discussed later in chapter 5.

Addressing the thesis more directly, these three concepts are useful in both interpreting both the continuity of my interviewees lives as well as more substantial changes within their life course. During my data collection I have sought to find out the circumstances in which the participants have lived and how they have responded accordingly. At all times, therefore, I have aimed to collect data about the contexts of their lives, the opportunities and the barriers they have come across, the decisions they have made in those contexts and the significant interactions they have had with others. Further, by adopting a life course perspective I am able

to begin to create practice stories through these individual biographies that reflect social practices, alongside the wider structural contexts surrounding lifestyle migrations.

Gender

As mentioned earlier, gender is relevant to the thesis as the social phenomenon researched - that of Westerners' migration to Isaan - appears to be an almost entirely male one. In this section then, I seek to lay down the theoretical ground work of how these men 'do gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) that can be incorporated more broadly into the practice theory above in combination with the other theoretical perspectives. Therefore, I seek to highlight how gender influences these lifestyle migrations in the everyday. In relation to the underlying practice theory it thus relates to 'internal structures', that describe cultural constructions of gender and masculinity as well as 'practices' that describe the ways in which these men conduct themselves in the new social context of Isaan. Addressing this, this next section introduces the concept of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) that outlines how gender is practiced in community, and then describe the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987, 2005) that brings into the focus masculinity as a cultural construction.

Doing gender

Developed by West and Zimmerman (1987), 'doing gender' argues that gender is not an 'achieved status' within a social context – i.e. you are not simply a man or woman by default - but a constant and continual process or a 'doing' in which individuals must navigate socially agreed upon norms that dictate to some extent how they must conduct themselves in society (p. 216). In short, they argue that gender is a continual process, similar to what has been discussed earlier in practice theory, whereby our gendered identities are defined in part by social expectations imposed by our assigned sex at birth, i.e. male or female yet with the ability to change through the agency action. With this in mind, I will attempt to outline a theory of masculinity to give a wider structural backdrop to the thesis—the “external structures” put in context with the cycle of structuration. I will begin by introducing Raewyn Connell's (1987) now seminal concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' and then outline how this concept has influenced various theories of masculinity since.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Put simply, hegemonic masculinity describes and makes visible the hierarchical power structures inherent between and within the genders (Demetriou 2001, p. 340). Such hierarchical power structures engage with feminist literature that presents men as dominant over women

(Butler 2004) in society and further asserts that a very small minority of men are positioned at the apex of this hierarchy, placing other forms of masculinity as subordinate or complicit to them (Demetriou 2001, p. 343). The practice of hegemonic masculinity is thus not necessarily normal, as it accounts for such a small minority, but it is *normative* (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 836) and therefore can be seen to inform the ‘doing’ of gender described above. Since its initial introduction into the social sciences the concept has been widely used, criticised and adapted by various authors.

A major criticism regarding the concept questions the rigidity of this hierarchical structure that allows little space for masculinity to change and further stresses aspects of ‘dominance’ over femininity and other forms of masculinity (Anderson and McCormack 2016, Demetriou 2001, Bridges and Pascoe 2014, Messner 1993). Anderson and McCormack (2016) in their construction of “*Inclusive Masculinity*” for example, argue that hegemonic masculinity has become more accepting and inclusive of previously subordinated forms of masculinity, namely homosexuality, exemplified in public and political support enacted over the past decades. Such actions, they suggest, weaken the dominance of previously hegemonic ideologies and disrupt the hierarchy hegemony. Other scholars (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, Demetriou 2001, Messner 1993) however, have suggested that these displays of acceptance and inclusivity are purely stylistic, branding them as *hybrid masculinities*. By stylistic they suggest that in incorporating aspects of subordinate masculinities, so called inclusive masculinities are enacting little real change to existing power structures (i.e. the dominance of young, straight, middle class, white males) rather, such performances seek only to mask and sustain them and are thus coined as hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, p. 247). Although hybrid masculinities are useful in conceptualising the shifting ideals within hegemonic masculinity, I would argue in line with Anderson and McCormack (2016) that they go too far in suggesting that power structures are static in their demographics and further, fail to acknowledge masculinity in a global and transnational context. It is without a doubt that hierarchical power structures between and within genders continue to exist and further that they continue to be dominated by young, white, middle class males in a Western context. Yet it seems difficult to argue with Anderson and McCormack’s more optimistic perspective that constraints and limits around previously subordinate masculinities seem to have shifted (in the West), suggesting a rebalance of power (Anderson and McCormack 2016, p. 556).

Returning to the concept of hegemonic masculinity Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stress the need to address four key areas in which hegemonic masculinity must be reformulated, that are:

“[a] more complex model of gender hierarchy, emphasizing the agency of women; explicit recognition of the geography of masculinities, emphasizing the interplay among local, regional, and global levels; a more specific treatment of embodiment in contexts of privilege and power; and a stronger emphasis on the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, recognizing internal contradictions and the possibilities of movement toward gender democracy.”

(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 829)

Of particular relevance to the thesis is the *“recognition of the geography of masculinities, emphasizing the interplay among local, regional and global levels”* (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 829), as the thesis is focussing on the migration of men and asking how their lives may change in a new geographical context. Thus, within the broader framework of practice theory, I seek to understand how and if these hierarchical constraints can ‘transform’ (O’Reilly 2012, p. 9) in the face of conjuncture-specific internal and external structures to allow a more nuanced understanding of the social practices of these men in a transnational context.

Emergent masculinity

In response to this Inhorn and Wentzell’s (2011) concept of ‘emergent masculinities’ allows a richer, more nuanced understanding of gendered experiences as it acknowledges agentic action in shaping gender identity as well as the broader societal context. By “emergent” they refer to the changing nature of masculinity over time and within geographical contexts, from which new forms of masculinity can arise. Here, parallels with the practice theory section can be drawn alongside Morawska’s (2011) concept of ‘emergence’. Further, Inhorn and Wentzell’s (2011) appear to echo Stones’ (2005) concept of conjuncture-specific internal structures in describing how strong social stereotypes regarding gender have in some geographical contexts led men to reject such conceptions, creating new ‘embodied spaces of masculinity’ (2011, p. 802).

Research by Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016) on Western masculinity in Isaan suggest that such an embodied space is in the ‘process’ of emerging in their paper “From sex tourist to son in law”, briefly mentioned in the introduction. In exploring this, they describe a gradual shift amongst these men’s identity from of ‘sex tourist’, to what they term ‘son in law’

(referring to their married status with Thai women). However, they dispute the use of the term *emergent*, arguing that these masculinities are not necessarily finished in their construction, but continually in transition, i.e. they never ‘crystallise’ (Thompson et.al. 2016, p. 63) into a tangible identity. Instead they choose to view these men as embodying “transient masculinities” that are forever evolving. Regardless, research into these transient masculinities gives some insight into the internal structures and practices of Western men in Isaan as they navigate the social terrain of the region, reshaping and challenging their dispositions in the process. However, what is not known are the relevant factors before migrating, nor is there a full account of the daily practices of these men in the ‘everyday’.

Applying the theoretical framework

Lifestyle migration as a concept has highlighted the importance of motivations, meanings and experiences when attempting to understand Western men’s emigration to Isaan. Further, practice theory has been demonstrated to provide a broad framework that identifies, through the ‘cycle of structuration’, both structural and agentive forces that influence and inform such motivations primarily at the meso level. Here, the concept of ‘emergence’ has been shown to be of particular relevance in both the migration and the gender literature stressing the importance of understanding the social phenomenon as a temporal process or a ‘process of becoming’. Gender theory adds to this framework, fleshing out the structures understood as influencing these men on the macro level, through their habitus. Literature on masculinity and Isaan shows that Western men are shifting previous dispositions through conjecturally-specific external structures, where their practices appear to alter over time in the context of Isaan, ‘transitioning’ from the position of “sex tourist” to “son-in-law” in the case of one study.

The next section will outline the methodology used during the fieldwork section of the thesis.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The previous chapters have introduced the research aims and theoretical perspectives underpinning the thesis as well as providing a theoretical framework, in the form of practice theory, to later bring together events prior and post migration. This chapter will introduce the methodological approaches used during the fieldwork period of the project and offer a reflexive account of the process. The chapter will begin by giving a short description of my own background. It will then go on to detail how interviewees were sourced and the methods that were used to gather information relevant to the thesis. Finally, ethical considerations will be discussed in the last section of the chapter.

Researcher background

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I previously lived in Thailand for seven months teaching English with my Norwegian wife. Travelling to Isaan was therefore not a particular daunting excursion for me, already having an insight into such a life. In fact, interviewees' lives in Isaan shared many similarities to the life I had lived in Phitsanulok, a five-hour drive away from the main field site of Udon Thani. As is common practice in the social sciences, I have tried to be reflexive (Davies 2008) of my own experiences during the process, especially whilst collecting and interpreting the data. In conducting fieldwork among predominantly white, Western men, many of whom were twenty or more years older than myself, my gender, age, race and sexuality are all seen as relevant in how I related to interviewees in the field. Had I been of the opposite gender for example, I may have had very different findings, from the reactions of men in the field. Indeed, during fieldwork online, there were at times negative views expressed towards Western women suggesting that my gender allowed me access to these men that may otherwise have been denied. Further, my position as a researcher in the field, is also seen as relevant, as will be discussed later, for some men I spoke to this led them to discuss their disapproval of the pursuits of areas such as gender studies.

Fieldwork

The next section will go into detail on how the fieldwork for the thesis was conducted. Collecting data for the thesis began in July 2018 through "*internet mediated research*" (IMR) (Hewson, Vogel and Laurent 2016, p. 32). This consisted of interviews over Skype and Facebook messenger and through analysis of a number of expatriate Facebook groups for Westerners living in Isaan. This will be further elaborated on in the section below. After three

months of fieldwork through IMR methods, I travelled to Isaan, in September of the same year, to conduct face to face research. This lasted for a month, where I visited four of the interviewees I had spoken with online. As well as conducting semi structured interviews, participant observation was also employed to get a deeper understanding of the social practices of expats living in the region in their ‘everyday’. A total of ten interviewees participated in the study, all of whom were men living in Isaan, bar one who was in the process of moving (see table 1 for an overview of the interviewees).

Virtual ethnography and online communities

The use of internet-based ethnography has been growing within the social sciences over the past decades (Hewson, Vogel and Laurent 2016). Research has made use of a number of internet based mediums designed to foster social discourse, such as: “forums”, that allocate various discussion “threads” for members to post questions in, “blogs”, where individuals write about their own experiences, as well as “Question and Answer” (Q&A), website pages that convey information about frequently asked topics (Hewson et.al. 2016). Contrary to traditional forms of fieldwork, i.e. face to face contexts, conducting fieldwork online requires the analyses of texts written by those researched. These texts may be archived sources - i.e. documented conversations within forums, blogs or online groups - or through responses posed by questions from the researcher. Further, communication technology such as Skype or Messenger have allowed “live” interactions that can be likened to “face to face” interviews (Hewson et.al. 2016). Facebook (the use of which will be discussed more later in the chapter) can perhaps be said to lie somewhere in between these various forms of online interaction, offering members of the site the ability to write “posts” – short bodies of text, that appear on an individual’s “wall”. Posted content is then able to be replied to in the form of “comments” (unless the author of the post has disabled this feature), which allows those able to see the post to write questions and responses to the post, either in real time or at a later date as well as share pictures and other forms of media such as news articles and documents (Dalsgaard 2016). Members may also create Facebook “groups” where individuals with similar interests can come together more easily to discuss topics of shared interest. Posting within these “groups” means information will appear to all members of these groups.

Why IMR

I chose to use IMR as a method of research for a variety of reasons. Logistically it made much more sense to utilise the internet to conduct a study handling life in Isaan, Thailand, from Norway. In doing so, not only was I able to reach out to a large set of potential interviewees

online, in order to set up interviews later in Isaan, but furthermore, was able to gain an insight into the social practices of these men before having even left for the field (discussed further in the section below). Moreover, by using IMR I experienced a surprising degree of candour from members of expatriate Facebook groups (see section below for a more detailed explanation of these groups), replying to posts I posted within these groups. Although I myself was surprised, this is not necessarily unusual in IMR as the effect of the internet is often thought to have a ‘disinhibiting effect’ (Joison 1998) that can increase individual’s willingness to share information during online interviews (Joison 1998, Madge and O’Connor 2002, McIntosh and Morse 2015). In using this method, I relied purely on ‘non-probability sampling techniques’ (Bryman 2012, p. 202). That is to say, participants were sourced through the availability of those willing to participate within the online groups I reached out within. This helped to find further participants through ‘snowballing’ (ibid), i.e. relying on those who were willing to participate to then refer me to others who would be willing to participate.

Facebook as a field

I originally attempted to reach out to interviewees through expatriate forums as has been done in previous studies conducting research in the “virtual field” (Constable 2003, McLelland 2002). However, this yielded only one reply from an administrator, informing me that the thread would be moved to a separate folder specifically for research-oriented posts—a folder it appeared nobody on the forum frequented, judging by the lack of replies to countless other research posts moved there.

Luckily, private expatriate Facebook Groups (EFGs) offered much more immediate and successful results. By EFGs I refer to Facebook groups (mentioned above) set up in this instance for individuals with an interest in living in Isaan to find each other more easily and discuss topics of shared interest. Joining such groups involved being screened by an “administrator” or “moderator”(often the creator(s) of the group) after sending a “request” notifying them I wished to join. I was then asked to review a set of questions that asked for my reasons for joining. As well as this I was asked to read and accept a series of rules for the group, outlining acceptable behaviour and conduct. Such behaviour and conduct, so called ‘netiquette’ (Hewson, Vogel and Laurent 2016), related to my posts and comments on the group “wall”. Offensive language as well as topics deemed unsuitable for the groups such as advertising businesses or personal products, posts unrelated to the area of Isaan and discussion related to the Thai monarchy (due to Thailand’s strict *lèse majesté* laws) were swiftly removed from the group and sometimes followed by a post from an administrator explaining why it had been

taken down. If members continued to post topics that lay outside the rules of the groups, they could be removed from the group. Although I originally saw these EFGs as a medium to recruit potential interviewees, EFGs especially proved an invaluable resource to the thesis in their ability to outline social practices in the ‘everyday’ for these Western men. This allowed me to get a sense of what may have been important for my interviewees and helped to inform later questions that I asked in semi-structured interviews. Further, after travelling to Isaan, I noticed discrepancies between what interviewees would talk about in the “face-to-face” interviews and what was being discussed online.

Interacting with members

As well as engaging in conversation with individuals online, IMR provides the opportunity to “lurk or to “listen in” unobserved and without people’s awareness.” (Constable 2003, p. 34). Despite sounding somewhat sinister, it simply describes the observation of posts on Facebook walls - in my case those of the EFGs I joined - an act that has become relatively commonplace for many who may see posts of friends and friends and family without actively replying to them. Such a method of research is relatively recent however, Facebook being founded in 2004 (Facebook 2019), and can be difficult to compare with more traditional methodologies.

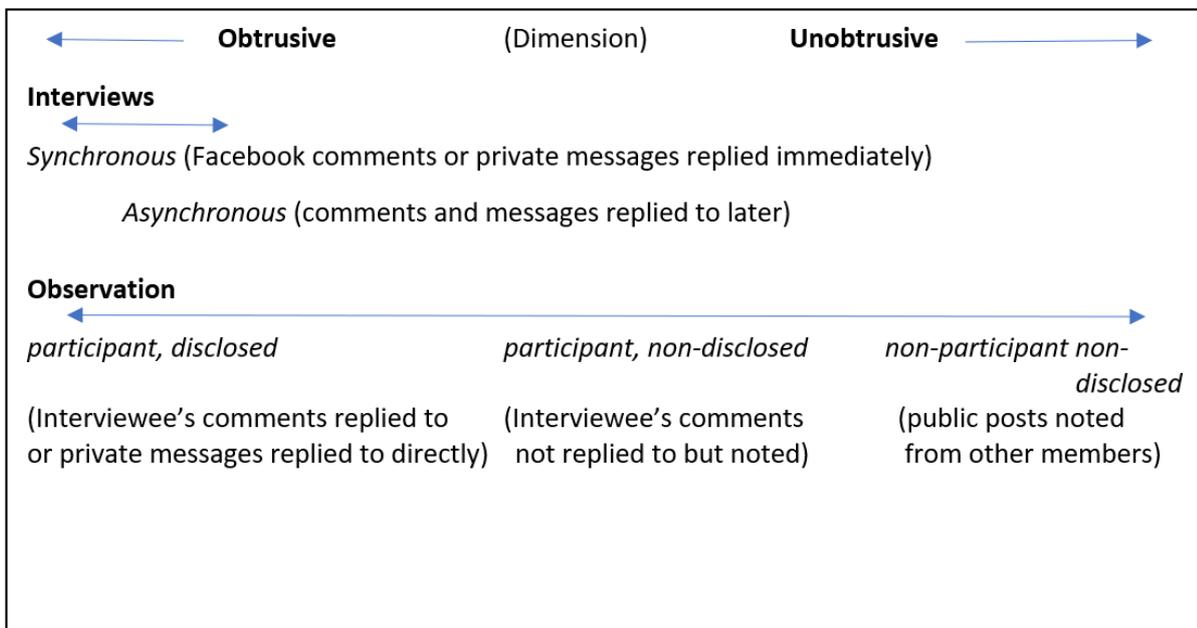


Figure 2 visualisation of interactions online (adapted from Hewson, Vogel and Laurent (2016, p. 37))

Conducting research in this manner consisted of so called ‘obtrusive’ and ‘unobtrusive’ methods (Hewson, Vogel and Laurent 2016, p. 37), that describe varying degrees of participation between the researcher, interviewees and members of online groups (see figure 2 for more information). Further participation could happen both ‘synchronously’ and

‘asynchronously’, meaning responses from interviewees could be immediate or given at a later time through comments on posts as well as private messages. Archived posts from the group walls were also used when relevant to the topic of emigration to Isaan as well as the social practices of the everyday. This provided important background information to the study and provided a large data set to work from. As this information was provided through members of the groups that did not participate in the study and therefore did not give consent it does raise some ethical concerns that will be addressed in a later section.

Following up in the field – the long road to Isaan

After three months of conversing through various expatriate Facebook groups and speaking privately online to interviewees, I travelled out to Thailand, Isaan, after arranging some initial meetings with a number of interviewees. Perhaps it could be argued that no physical meeting was required at all, and that I could have continued to conduct fieldwork over the internet. However, I felt it necessary as there can be differences in attitudes and perceptions expressed online compared to that shown in face to face encounters (McLelland 2002, p. 401), a sentiment that suggests notions of backstage and frontstage personas (Goffman 1959) in attitudes shared online and in reality. Further, the theoretical perspectives underpinning the thesis focus heavily on the ‘everyday’ experiences of interviewees that give an added importance to participant observation being conducted in a face to face manner.

In deciding that I needed to travel to Thailand I was presented with a problem. Online these individuals had been relatively easy to get in contact with, all being conveniently grouped together as living in the north east of Thailand in the region of Isaan. In reality however, what this logistically describes is a large and somewhat difficult region to navigate. Unlike the tightly packed tourist hot spots of Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket that many Westerners choose to settle in, Isaan is a vast region, scattered with small towns and villages. Gone are the eight lanes of traffic and swarms of motorbikes weaving in and out, tuk-tuks hailing you for a ride at every corner. Here the roads are often unfinished, or poorly maintained, potholes swallowing wheels as you trundle between rice fields. The region mainly consists of farmland, traditionally an agricultural region, providing Thailand with the majority of its crops (Gebhardt 2005, p. 3), and has not seen the economic, industrial and tourism centred development that the coastal and northern regions surrounding Chiang Mai have. Towns are often small and spread out, making it difficult to visit interviewees as public transport can be irregular and unreliable, if available at all. Thus, I was faced with a dilemma of where to focus my fieldwork, given that I only had a short amount of time to meet with interviewees in the field. Most of my interviewees lived in

towns along a main road, known as “Friendship Road”, connecting Bangkok to Vientiane, the capital of Laos.

The original plan had been to start in the northern most part of the region and work my way back south, down Friendship Road towards Bangkok as my fieldwork drew to a close. And so, after much deliberation influenced to a great degree by money, I decided to take a coach for eight hours instead of a forty-minute flight—a decision that would later determine the way in which I conducted the rest of my fieldwork. An hour into the coach ride, I quickly experienced how isolated the lack of infrastructure in the region can be, as the coach slowed, and we came to a tired halt outside a 7-Eleven. An hour past and there had been no sign of movement. Having lived in Thailand before I had a feeling that this was not going to be a quick pit stop.

In Thailand there is a common expression that can be heard whenever anything goes wrong, big or small, “*mai ben rai*”. It can perhaps be best likened to “never mind” in English, although it is much more versatile. This was a *mai ben rai* moment. From the limited amount of information, I could understand, it became apparent that one of the wheels had been about to fall off before we stopped and the driver was now in the process of trying to get a replacement. Not much happened for the next ten hours, and after a night of very little sleep, we finally set off again only to stop ten minutes down the road as the coach swayed gently with a new but not exactly secure wheel. Finally defeated, the driver called a for a new coach and we left our three-wheeler behind as we continued on our way to Udon Thani .

So, in fear of another eighteen-hour coach ride, I made the decision to conduct fieldwork from Udon Thani venturing out into the surrounding area, where four of the interviewees I had met online lived when necessary. This didn’t prove as debilitating as I had first thought, as interviewees were often willing enough to come into the town to talk with me or in three occasions generous enough to come and collect me and drive me out to their houses.

Getting off at the bus station Udon Thani was larger than I expected, the shadow of a Central Plaza (a shopping centre chain that can be seen all around Thailand) looming over the surrounding buildings, where food vendors parked up ready for the lunch rush. There was, however, no signs of any Western migrants. As I got closer to my hotel however, the shop fronts began to change, English words adorning their signs and then, turning up the last street—that I would later discover was where all the expatriates in town gathered – I was suddenly in what would perhaps be called “Europe Town” or “Little Europe” had it been in an American

city. Packed with bars displaying various northern European affiliations and cuisines, it was clear the town had a sizeable Western population. English, , Scottish, Irish, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch, the odd French flag and a few Australian, all stuck out from the buildings, in faded colours from the baking Sun.

Participant Observation and semi structured interviews

That night, I sent another post in one of the expat Facebook groups, informing everyone that I had arrived and asking if there was anyone willing to meet up and talk. I had one immediate reply from a British man (David, 25), who I had not previously spoken to online, wanting to meet at a bar along the street I had walked down earlier. It was here I met many of my interviewees, as they drank and socialised. Although perhaps not the most professional of places to meet interviewees it served as a central meeting point for many (as only one actually lived in the town) when visiting town to meet friends from time to time. Moreover, by involving myself in the social scene I was able to build up a rapport and trust with many of the interviewees that later lead to more enlightening experiences regarding their day to day lives, such as being invited out to their homes on the outskirts of the town.

In order to determine whether interviewees fit the definition of lifestyle migrant I chose only to speak to those that were living (or in the case of one, was aiming to live) permanently in Thailand, as opposed to just coming on holiday. Further, all interviewees, bar one, had been living in Isan for a minimum of six months (the longest period was nine years). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 64 (see table 1). All were male and had Thai partners.

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Length of time in Isan	No. of interviews (online and face to face)
Corey	24	American	Two years	3
David	25	British	Six months	4
Marc	37	Swiss	Eleven	4
Juha	44	Finnish	One year	2
Carlos	50	Spanish	One year	1

Mike	54	Australian	Six years	1
Dale	55	American	Currently moving	3
Fridtjof	56	German	Five years	1
Brendan	64	Irish	Six years	1
Ernst	-	German	Three years	1

Table 1: Overview of Interviewees

As mentioned above participant observation was conducted both over the internet and face to face at a later date. Participant observation as a method was chosen as a major component of the research question aims to explore the ‘everyday’ experiences of individuals within larger social institutions. Thus, by employing participant observation as a method, emphasis is put on living among interviewees to allow the researcher to gain “*concrete evidence of their subject’s lives*” (Davies 2008, p. 79).

I chose to couple this method with semi-structured interviews (SSI) as I felt the method lent itself well to participant observations, often creating a natural interaction between researcher and interviewee and further, making it easier to engage in participant observation and interviewees’ lives to a greater degree later on in the process. Semi structured interviews took place both online - over Facebook messenger or skype - and after arriving in Isan, where I would often use an interview guide on the first meeting with interviewees to help break the ice and get to know them better. Initial SSIs, both online and in Isan would often last around an hour. More informal meetings, which took place as I got to know interviewees better, could go on for hours. In one case I spent a full twenty hours with an interviewee, who kindly invited me to join his family for the day, visiting local sites, shopping and then having dinner with his neighbours and extended Thai family into the early hours of the morning.

As a part of the thesis focussed on life-course perspectives, SSI proved useful as a methodology in regard to focussing in on particular events in interviewees’ pasts (Mcintosh and Morse 2015, p. 1). As mentioned above, in preparation for these interviews I had a number of questions ready, however more often than not I let interviewees veer away from the original question as new insights and themes I had not expected came up in their explanations regarding their migration.

I had originally hoped to record many of the conversations I had on a voice recorder. This proved difficult however, as initially many meetings took place in bars, where there was loud music playing or a great deal of noise from others, which also proved a problem as it did not seem appropriate to record when other's conversations may have been overheard. Thus, I mainly tried to write brief notes on my mobile phone, summarising interviewees' thoughts and experiences, which I would then write up more fully in my fieldnotes immediately after the meeting or the next morning. This could be hard at times, as I felt writing notes could interrupt the flow of conversation, leading to me to occasionally type notes on my mobile when I went to the bathroom.

Ethics

As is usual practice in social science research, it was important to make sure all individuals who participated were informed about their position in the study—that they would be anonymised and further that they had the right to pull out of the study at any point. However, this was perhaps not as straightforward as it would be had I met informants in the field. As noted earlier, I originally posted an invitation to participate in my thesis through expatriate Facebook groups, employing IMR methods. In doing so, gaining informed consent could be more challenging, especially in regard to understanding interviewees had “*digested and understood consent information*” (Hewson, Vogel and Laurent 2016, p. 147). Nevertheless, information was provided in an information and consent form that I asked interviewees to read before proceeding with any further conversations after initial contact was made. Background information to the thesis was given in the initial post sent in the group and then further information pertaining to the data and interviewees rights was sent as a PDF file over email or Facebook Messenger for interviewees to read, sign and send back.

Securing anonymity when talking over the internet can present a variety of problems, mainly that it can be possible to trace interviewees through comments they have made through search engines or scrolling through public groups on social media and further, the nature of such data can be ambiguous in regards to its status of public or private (NESH 2016, p. 14). As some of the Facebook groups I joined were public - meaning anyone with access to a Facebook account could read the posts - I suggested that sensitive information was never not discussed in the comments section of the posts and any direct quotes used from interviewees are either from private EFGs where comments are hidden from the general public, private conversations over Messenger and Skype or from conversations conducted in person in Thailand. Further, in line with NSD ethical regulations, I stored all information about participants in the study (including

transcripts, consent forms, pseudonym lists and fieldnotes) in a password protected folder on my laptop so as not to risk data about interviewees being stolen or mistakenly seen by anyone from outside the study.

Ethical dilemmas concerning so called non-participants, who did not give consent to participate in the study also presents a problem when conducting IMR research (NESH 2016, p. 147). As stated earlier, in conducting online research I joined Facebook expat groups for those living in Isaan. In doing so I was given access to an archive of older posts that discussed information about moving to Isaan as well as the everyday social practices of member lives. In justifying the use of this data, I would suggest that it is much the same as the practice of participant observation in the field, where the research will “observe” those in the researched environment, both participating and not. I myself practice such a method, observing the Western men in the town I stayed in while in Isaan, as well taking in my surroundings while talking to interviewees in bars. However, I did not ever quote any of these “observed” individuals directly. With posts observed in the online Facebook expat groups I do not directly use any quotes or words from these individuals which contained sensitive information. Immersing myself in these groups and reading posts on a regular basis - some from interviewees who participated in the thesis some who did not – helped in comprehending the world my interviewees are moving into a greater degree.

Moving away from ethical practices, this next paragraph will briefly discuss the content of research and how it is used. In representing men emigrating to Isaan there is always a danger of misrepresentation. As has been stated on numerous occasions in the previous chapters, attitudes and ideas surrounding men emigrating to Thailand are often negative or even derogatory. Previous research has suggested that these men appeared to want to distance themselves from the male “sex tourist” personas often portrayed by the media. Further, as mentioned earlier, many of the men who first replied to my own post, in the Facebook expat groups, stated that they wished to prove this general perception wrong and often saw me as a way to “set the record straight”. I also had a number of responses airing suspicion as to my intent in gaining insight into individual’s ‘everyday’ lives in Isaan. As a consequence, I understand that access to such personal information is not given lightly. However, against the backdrop of movements such as #metoo and #timesup that have taken root in public discourse over the last few years, research into masculinity is of growing importance. Given that the data collected may highlight aspects of these movements, I had to ask myself, is it right to conceal findings in order to honour interviewees’ wishes to distance themselves from such perceptions?

In doing so I run the risk of creating objectively poor findings by concealing or hiding elements of research in the name of protecting participants reputations and further, skewing the data.

Such a dilemma is nothing new, and in addressing the problem I take inspiration from Everett C. Hughes (referenced in Helman-Hughes' article "Studying "Going Concerns" Everett Hughes on methods (2010). The emphasis of findings in Hughes eyes is not to "reveal" or "unmask" the participants and their social practices but rather to "comprehend" them. Therefore, the findings of a study are not seen as a port of call to pass judgement on participants but rather to represent them in as neutral a way as possible. Thus, research should be as close to being "value neutral" as can be, an admittedly impossible task, but one that I strive towards, nonetheless. In researching lifestyle migrant men in Isaan, I therefore see myself as exploring the factors that created their migration them to the region as well as the social practices that outline their daily lives afterwards.

A final point to note is the length of time spent conducting fieldwork in the field. Traditionally in social science research, participant observation is undertaken over an extended period of time (Davies 2008, p. 5), much longer than the month I spent in Isaan. However, along with the virtual ethnographic research, I believe the time allotted allows enough qualitative data to be collected and furthermore, ethnography as a method has increasingly been employed in shorter periods in what may be called a "micro ethnography" (Bryman 2012, p. 433).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approaches used in the thesis. Through using both SSI and participant observation the data ascertained from interviewees will be used to provide insights into their perspectives regarding the 'everyday' as well as help to flesh out life-course perspectives that map important events (trajectories, transitions and turning points) leading up to the migration to Isaan. Ultimately O'Reilly's 'cycle of structuration', outlined in the theory chapter, will be used to make sense of the data during the analysis chapter. As I have only conducted fieldwork with a small number of interviewees (ten) the conclusions I can draw about such lifestyle migration as a whole are limited. Further, sampling of participants in the study was not necessarily representative of the population as a non-probability sampling was used. Nevertheless, the data set gives a qualitative insight into the everyday lives of this set of lifestyle migrant men living in Isan, adding to a small but emerging body of literature on the topic.

Chapter 5: Social risk management: Turning points and trajectories to a ‘better life’ in Isaan

This chapter will introduce Isaan as site of fieldwork, outlining the everyday conversations many of these men had on a daily basis. Western men’s lifestyle migration to Isaan will then be delved into deeper through life course histories created from semi structured interviews and participant observation. In doing so I address two major aspects of the thesis: 1) the conditions prior to migration in interviewees home countries and 2) their lives in Isaan afterward. As such this chapter is outlining interviewees’ own perspectives of their migration to Isaan. This will be discussed in the wider context of practice theory later in the thesis, during the findings and conclusion.

Finally, this chapter will also introduce the concepts of ‘social risk management’ to better explore the relation between interviewees’ ‘choice’ - the so called ‘consumptive desires’ integral to lifestyle migration - to leave their home country and move to Isaan. By ‘risk’ I am referring to what Fitzpatrick and Kwön (2006) define as a “*lack of certainty about future outcomes*” (p. 1156). By social risk management I refer to the ‘strategies’ employed by individuals, communities or states to either prevent, mitigate or cope with risk (ibid).

Finding ‘freedom’ in the field

During my fieldwork in Isaan, many days (or evenings as was more often the case) were spent in the bars of Udon Thani in an attempt to meet potential interviewees as well as get a general feel for the ‘lifestyle’ interviewee’s lived. During this time, I had a lot of conversations with men living in the region. I was often surprised at how open these Western men were to talking to a stranger and sharing their own version of events that led them to live in Isaan. These encounters were often brief, lasting between twenty minutes to a couple of hours, compared to the time I spent with the main interviewees, which was a number of days in some cases. Nevertheless, observing the field proved useful in highlighting the general themes underlying Western men’s migration to Isaan, of which the most important was ‘freedom’.

The concept of freedom was first expressed to me by Joris, a middle-aged Dutch man I met whilst waiting for an interviewee in a bar. After explaining to him my position as a master’s student Joris quickly seized the opportunity to share his story with me.

He no longer lived in Thailand it turned out but had done so previously for eight years. Now he comes back every year for a holiday as much as possible (this being his fifth time that year). Originally, he had decided to live in Thailand after divorcing his wife, at the age of 49. Why Thailand I asked? *“Here there was freedom”*, he told me. This idea of ‘freedom’ was difficult for him to articulate but he frequently returned to the feeling that in his home country he was judged unfairly – and further in Isaan *“no one was watching him”*. The freedom he felt was connected to Thai culture, he explained, especially Buddhist values that emphasised openness and friendliness towards others and had given Thailand its unofficial epitaph, “The Land of Smiles”. Despite his love of Thailand, Joris had eventually moved back to the Netherlands after he told me he was left with only 100 euros to his name. When I asked him how this had happened, he gave me a vague answer about starting a business and failing, as well as a Thai girlfriend that had taken his money. Despite these unfortunate circumstances, I found it interesting that Isaan still seemed to be a place he wished to return to, his feeling of freedom obviously creating a strong draw for him.

Feeling unsettled and constrained in Western society was a common topic among the men I spoke with and often discussed in relation to freedom. These could be described in the vague feelings of freedom above, often set in opposition to feeling uncomfortable and unwanted back home to extreme views that fell quickly into far right-wing rhetoric of racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Such extreme sentiments were expressed by a group of European expatriates from France and Germany one evening, who told me their horror at the number of Islamic migrants moving to Europe over the last decade as well as the detrimental pursuit of gender studies and its acceptance in mainstream politics. Two of the men that night spent the majority of the evening discussing George Soros, a common figure of discussion for right-wing newspapers such as Breitbart, sharing theories about his “socialist agendas” and his influence behind the scenes of the US and Europe. If I did not know that, I did not know anything useful I was told. It was for these reasons they had decided to make a permanent life for themselves in Isaan. This group also felt they needed to stay away from the larger towns in general, meeting only occasionally, and living a relatively isolated life. The westernised bars that crowded the street we sat in in Udon Thani were not a ‘real’ way to live they explained. This was Disneyland, they said, *“If you want to see how American’s live then you don’t go to Disneyland”*. So, if I wanted to know what real life in Isaan was like I needed to leave the town. I was invited to one of the men’s farm where he told me there was no air conditioning,

only a mosquito net, and that that was “*real life*”. Although I followed him up on his offer, he did not have time in the end to meet again.

The opinions of these Western men were the most extreme I experienced whilst in Isaan. I would not say they were representative of most I met, some interviewees even stating that they no longer felt comfortable in Europe because of the very same extreme right-wing discussed that night. Nevertheless, almost all the men I spoke with shared a common feeling that they felt constrained and limited back home for a variety of reasons. Following this, moving to Isaan seemed to provide a sense of freedom, strongly connected to their reception from local community.

Expanding on this, the reception of local community appeared to be important to all of the main interviewees and was often set in opposition to life back home. The next section will present four life course histories to add further nuance to how interviewees decided to migrate to Isaan and just what exactly ‘freedom’ meant.

Life course histories: Trajectories to Thailand

Juha:

Juha (44) a Finnish man I met through one of the expatriate Facebook groups online was a relatively typical case of the men I met in Isaan. In many ways Juha fits the stereotype of Western men migrating to Thailand. He did not seem to have a great opinion of Western women and often contrasted them with Thai women, who he described as “*love machines*”. He had moved over with his girlfriend who was from Isaan after meeting in Finland. He did not speak much about his previous relationships but told me he had had a girlfriend for fourteen years with he had a daughter with that he is in touch with to some degree. Juha and his new girlfriend had tried for a time to live in Finland, but this had not worked out as he told me “*things just didn’t feel right*”. When I asked him to elaborate on this, he would only repeat that there “*something was not good in Finland*”, and he no longer felt comfortable. It was a feeling that was shared by many more of his colleagues (in his work as a quality control advisor for lifts), who he said were also thinking to leave Finland. Choosing to leave and start a new life in Isaan was undoubtedly influenced by his partner. However, having visited a few times already, Juha explained he had had the opportunity to travel all over the world through his work and felt that Isaan was the right place to settle down. “*The people are very friendly there*” he told me on several occasions and “*Everybody helps each other*”.

So, after deciding to leave at the end of 2017, Juha packed everything up, sold his house and left for Thailand in January of the new year. With the money from his house and his savings Juha began his new life in Isaan. The original plan had been to build a house for his girlfriend and himself on the land her parents owned. Juha had hoped to be able to claim his pension early, but unfortunately had to wait another six years until he was fifty. Instead, he came up with a plan to grow crops that he hoped would provide him a large enough income to survive off of. He soon realised however, that the money he had taken with him from Finland as well as the revenue produced by his farming endeavours would not cover the costs of the lifestyle he wanted. Although life is cheap in Thailand, even more so in Isaan, he could not live “*a western style life*” he told me.

When I spoke with Juha he'd been living in Thailand for seven months. The first four months he had spent building his new house and in the last two he had been searching for a job. Initially he searched for work in his profession but after applying across the country and hearing nothing, he looked elsewhere. Instead, he is now selling insurance with a Finnish company in Thailand, which pays him a decent wage by Thai standards (50,000 baht per month) as well as giving him a permanent visa status. However, working for this company comes with a catch as he must travel to a suburb on the outskirts of Bangkok to work. This requires Juha, to work for a number of months at a time away from his home in Isaan, renting a condo while there. He tries to travel back to his home in Isaan as often as possible, sometimes every weekend, but that can be tough, taking seven hours by car. Again, despite this inconvenience and inability to earn enough to support his lifestyle in Isaan, Juha expressed strongly that he much preferred life there over the larger cities in Thailand or back home in Finland. “*In Isaan people are friendly*” he told me once more.

Community and family appeared to play a large role in forming Juha's decision to live in Isaan, despite the barriers presented in living there. The friendliness of his girlfriend's family as well as the people in the village were often contrasted with his working life on the edge of Bangkok and his life back in Finland. I did not meet Juha in person, speaking only over skype and Facebook Messenger where he sent me a number of pictures of his life, including one of an ultrasound scan of his baby. The prospect of starting a new family seemed very important to Juha, something he was quick to tell me. The next case continues this theme of community and family but comes from very different circumstances.

David:

David (25) from UK, had lived in Thailand for seven months at the time of interview and was quick to tell me on our first meeting that back home his life had been heading in a downward spiral. With no support from family he had begun to feel increasingly hopeless about his future prospects. It was this that led him to Thailand, and eventually Isaan.

For David, looking back he saw things beginning to go downhill after his parents divorced when he was 22. Having lived with them up until that point, he suddenly had nowhere to live, his mother moving to France and his father not offering a place for him to stay. Although old enough to provide for himself he explained that his work as a brick layer was becoming increasingly pressured and he was struggling to get through the days, *“I’d be ordering people around 20 years older than me and telling them what to do, even though I hadn’t been trained”* he told me. With poor management and an ever-rising workload that piled on responsibilities beyond his role, he began to feel as if he had no control over his life. Eventually he decided to jump ship and took a job as a chef in a local pub. Stranded for a time between homes, living on friends’ sofas, he eventually found a permanent place to stay with an eastern European colleague and her family. He speaks of his time living with his colleagues fondly, enjoying newfound friendships and becoming part of the family. Importantly for David he enjoyed helping them with their English language. Unfortunately, some of the residents in his new household were involved in selling drugs, which he eventually got caught up in.

Things unsurprisingly began to once more get out of control, his work as a chef became stressful and underwhelming and he became increasingly involved with the criminal activities of some of his housemates. Things came to a dramatic head after he saw a friend get stabbed. *“I needed a way out,”* he told me at this point. His experiences living with his eastern European colleague gave him the idea that perhaps he could teach English as a foreign language. With little knowledge of the topic, David found a TEFL course (Teach English as a Foreign Language) in Thailand and decided to take a chance. The course had been in the South of Thailand where, during the TEFL course, he’d met his Thai girlfriend. Originally from Isaan, she’d left to find a job with a higher income elsewhere in the country, in order to send money back to her family but did not really enjoy her life in the South. He says they immediately got on and after little deliberation, decided to move back to her home in Isaan.

Since moving David told me he has worked hard to integrate into the community. He has found a job working for an English teaching company online, that allows him to teach from home. The money he makes from his work he invests back into the property his girlfriend owns,

hoping to expand their one-room house to create a more western style of living. His small one room house is crammed with furniture that functions as a bedroom, living area and office for his teaching job. In his daily life David is surrounded by his girlfriend's family who help out with the construction on his house and often sleep in an adjacent property that his girlfriend also owns.

Upon his initial arrival he says he was received sceptically by many of the locals due to his young age, many doubting his ability to earn money. As a consequence, he says he feels he has had to prove himself, by investing in a new car for his girlfriend and himself and starting work on their house. He also showed me a number of 24carat gold jewellery items he'd bought for himself to display the fact he has money. Since then he says that people are less sceptical of his place in the community, and David appears to be well liked, many people in the village greeting him as he took me around. The strong sense of community is something that was particularly attractive about the lifestyle for him commenting:

It's like the 1950's here still, you know your neighbour"

and

"There is still a close knit community here",

After moving to Isan, David says he feels far more in control of his life. His new job teaching online only requires him to work fifteen to twenty hours a week and his hours can be scheduled as he sees fit. Further, he now feels like he has a stable position with his girlfriend and her family and feels hopeful about his future, marvelling at the fact he now owns his own house and a new car, something he says his friends back home would never be able to achieve at his age. On a day off from his teaching David drove me to number of fields his girlfriend's family owned. Meeting some Thai friends by a lake we sat and fished. *"Can it get any better than this?"* he asked me. Certainly, David's life seemed idyllic and compared to his life back in the UK things seemed undeniably better.

However, working and staying in Thailand was not necessarily simple. On the second of our meetings, David revealed that he was getting married to his girlfriend next month, despite being together for only six months. This, he explained, was only a formality as he was not eligible for a permanent visa status or Thai bank account without a job based in Thailand.

The next case, Marc, who shared some similar experiences to David, also highlights tensions between living in Isaan and limitations and constraints that such lifestyles create.

Marc:

Marc (37) originally from Switzerland, had lived in Thailand for eleven years, and in Isaan for the majority of that time. He first contacted me over Facebook Messenger, stating that his story was perhaps of interest as it was *“not so usual”*.

His migration to Isaan had been an accident, emerging out of a series of unfortunate circumstances. Before his life in Isaan he had had a drug habit, *“from acid to cocaine”* and was left with few around him to rely on for support—in fact, according to Marc, his only real line of support had been a single close friend. Marc described his family situation as *“less than perfect”*, stating that his father had had little time for him and he had been subject to physical and psychological violence growing up, leading him to search for *“love and peace and [end] up doing drugs”*. In the beginning he said his drug habit had been *“manageable”* – he held down a job and was in a long-term relationship – until his best friend left, having met a Thai woman whom he moved with to Thailand. This caused Marc’s world to completely fall apart. He spiralled downwards, lost his job and girlfriend and eventually became homeless. He continued this life for some time until he says, *“I was mentally fucked, I got a rehab offer in a mental hospital. But I never appeared there”*. At the same time his best friend had got in touch hearing of Marc’s situation. He told him rehab would not help and instead he should come to Thailand to visit him. This was enough to convince Marc. He decided against the rehab centre and instead left for Thailand with the little money he had.

This was the beginning of a new life for Marc, and after three months he says he was rehabilitated. He quickly found a Thai girlfriend in Isaan and got engaged. Back on his feet, he decided to return to Switzerland, encouraged by his fiancé to earn as much money as he could in a short period of time and then come back to Thailand. His engagement did not last however, after Marc realised that his fiancé and family were *“after his money”*. Despite this experience, Marc was not put off living in the area and decided to stay, buying a motorbike and taking a tour of the region. Within the year he had met another Thai woman, who eventually would become his wife (of eight years at the point of interview). Marc now lives in Isaan in a small village with his wife and two children, where he has set up a business making European cheeses and breeding exotic animals.

Here, he is surrounded by the local Thai community with very few Westerners around (the closest being a good hour’s drive away). To some extent this seems to have been a conscious decision, as he often expressed his dislike of the majority of Westerners to me, saying things like

“Foreigners are kind [of] annoying for me. I got the theory most expats are alpha humans.”

Consequently, Marc appears to be highly involved with the local community and spends most of his time with his Isaan family (his wife and two children). Living on a small holding a good hour’s drive away from the nearest village, he is relatively isolated, with only a handful of houses around his area. Marc is fluent in Thai and the Isaan dialect (that is closer to Laos than Thai). Furthermore, he appears to have an in-depth knowledge of local practices described in the introduction, as daughter duties, as well as the matrilocal practices that that underpin life in Isaan.

Although Marc runs his business with his wife, he must return to Switzerland for two or three months a year for work, his business in Isaan not making enough money to live on and more for his own interests than to make money for the time being. Making money in Isaan was not easy according to Marc as non-Thai citizens are prohibited from working in a number of professions. Even to sell the products he was producing Marc told me his wife has to handle all the money, playing down his involvement in it to authorities, in what he described as a “half legal” way of doing business. Despite his continued reliance on his home country, he does not see Switzerland as a place to live permanently for him and his family. In his view the West is too focussed on work and money and did not allow people enough time with family. Marc often spoke negatively about the West, describing it as constraining and limiting to his freedom especially in regard to work life balance. For example, the day before returning to Thailand on his last three-month work excursion, he commented on Facebook *“Last day of capitalistic slavery, glad it is over today. Coming home tomorrow.”*. When I asked him what it was he did in Switzerland he told me he was a *“poor labor worker with no joy in life”*. and later elaborated:

“in CH [Switzerland] you spend more time on work with people you don’t like than you spend time with your loved ones [...] I have no family bond in Switzerland [which doesn’t help things], in fact the only reason I would change my mind [to live in Switzerland] is the illusion of social security in Switzerland ... but in my eyes, as I say... pure illusion. Getting money in Switzerland and liv[ing] 7-8 month in Thailand is the best option in my case.”

Marc's the like David's story is much more extreme in the circumstances that led them to leave their home countries. However, although both becoming highly involved in their local communities and clearly finding a great deal of meaning in them especially their respective Isaan partners and families, a major factor in their own 'search for a better life' often described by lifestyle migration literature was meaningful employment.

Brendan:

I was introduced to Brendan (64) through David, who arranged for me to visit him at his house. The two had become friends through their partners, David's girlfriend and Brendan's boyfriend having gone to school together. Brendan was the only homosexual Westerner I met during my time in Isaan, although this did not seem to have much bearing on his choice to live in Isaan over the rest of Thailand, his motivations mirroring many of the other interviewees. He lives a five or ten minute drive away from David down a pothole laden cul-de-sac, on the outskirts of David's village. Originally from Ireland he lived up to the talkative stereotype, immediately relaying a story about his recent trip to Phuket after I arrived. He knew Phuket well, and had previously intended to retire there, having visited a number of times over the years on holiday.

Before he retired, Brendan had lived all over, having worked for an engineering company that had sent him around the world for his work. He'd first come to Thailand as part of a year of travelling in his early twenties. Thailand had been one of his first destinations and after finishing his tour he felt he wanted to come back to the country again. The lifestyle had immediately struck him as desirable. Friendly people, good climate, cheap cost of living as well as an openness to his sexuality. He'd come to Isaan with a previous boyfriend almost a decade ago and liked the region, explaining to me that there had been a vibrant gay scene in the nearby city of Udon Thani at the time (which had since been quashed by the military, according to Brendan). Brendan now lives with his partner, who is from Isaan, in his in laws house, rarely visiting Udon Thani. His house is grander than most I saw; built over two storeys and set back from the road with a neat European style lawn and driveway running up to the house. He has perhaps achieved the vision that Juha and David strived for, having a degree of Western style living in the countryside of Isaan. The house is filled with people, including his partner's parents, sister and her two children. Just like David, living with his in-law's family did not seem to bother Brendan. He was not going to have children himself he explained, so it was great to be able to be around his in-law's children and be a part of their lives. After his recent trip to Phuket he told me fondly of the welcome he'd received from the children, waiting

for him, looking through the window of the house and running up the driveway to hug him as he arrived.

Like the previous three interviewees, Brendan was well known in the local community, taking part in local events and telling me with a wry smile that he'd been known to disappear to the local shop to drink with the locals every now and then. I asked if he'd ever move back to Ireland, or why he had not stayed in Australia, another country he had lived a long period of time in while working. In Australia at least there was also a good climate. Neither were an option, the community he had built for himself in Isaan was not possible anywhere else, he loved the people and further, he did not feel judged for his sexuality there. Even Phuket, where he had already built up a large social network before coming to Isaan was not the same. Phuket was a lifestyle he no longer wanted, he told me. He had originally planned to retire there but felt that now it was not a place to live, only visit on holiday. He did express that he missed being able to have deeper conversations with people in English, not being able to speak Thai to a fluent level. However, this was not enough to make him leave the area.

What Isaan offered was the "*quiet life*". Here, in the evenings, he told me he enjoyed sitting outside in the warm air and sound of the crickets on his own, watching videos with the sound turned down low. On a day to day basis Brendan kept himself busy with odd jobs, tinkering in the garden and fixing things up around the house. When I arrived, he'd just finished building a rather luxurious doghouse with a tiled floor and inside light for a new litter of puppies. As I noted earlier Brendan appears to be living a life that many of the other interviewees I spoke with aspired to. He differs from those mentioned earlier as he is retired and has the ability to claim a relatively generous pension. Further, he does not seem to share the opinion that work life was too overwhelming and unhealthy in regard to the work-life balance, as Marc and David did.

To summarise, through these four life course histories, interviewees often perceived Isaan as a place of freedom often related to the community around them. All but one interviewee had a partner from Isaan, and the majority seemed to enjoy the close relationship they had with their partners family as illustrated in the narratives of interviewees above. For Marc and David as well the other interviewee under forty meaningful work, or lack thereof, was also important to their lifestyle migrations. In line with contemporary lifestyle migration literature, their problems were regularly described as stemming from Western society, their lifestyle migration thus seen as a way of escaping the West.

The next section will try to bring make sense of these experiences as a form social risk management alongside the concept of lifestyle migration.

Lifestyle migration as a form of social risk management

“The ‘good life’ takes many shapes and form; [migrants’] narratives articulate ongoing quests to seek refuge from what they describe as the shallowness, individualism, risk and insecurity of contemporary (Western) lifestyles in the perceived authenticity of ‘meaningful places’” (O’Reilly and Benson, Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experience 2009, p. 3)

As the quote above suggests and indeed as has been shown through the life course histories and discussions with men in field above, lifestyle migration is often perceived as way to escape the precarity of Western life. Such perceptions differed among interviewees, however. For Juha and Brendan, as is often the case in lifestyle migration, prior knowledge of Thailand through time spent as a tourist was relevant in informing their decision to settle down in the region. During this time, these men also felt life at home was becoming increasingly isolating, the community just *“not feeling right”* as Juha put it, and Brendan feeling far more comfortable during his holidays to Thailand due to his sexuality. Further, financial factors clearly played a role in migrations. Brendan for example, was able to claim a reasonable pension that enabled him to live a comfortable lifestyle that many others aspired to. Although Juha met some barriers to achieving the lifestyle Brendan had, he too looked ahead to his pension, clearly considering the benefits it would bring in five years’ time.

For Marc and David (and interestingly the other interviewee not nearing retirement, Corey), there was little if any prior knowledge of Isaan, or indeed Thailand, nor an ability to claim a pension any time soon (if at all). Their experiences, as they perceived them, were influenced by turning points in their lives rather than transitions, relating to the breakdown of relationships with family and friends and involvement with drugs, as well as barriers in the West that stopped them from finding meaningful work. Migration was thus seen as a way to create opportunities to pursue meaningful avenues of work, as well as a better work-life balance.

After settling in Isaan, despite the differences in circumstances prior to migration, many similarities could be found in their daily lives. Most notable was the importance of community that constituted spending time with Thai partners and their Isaan families as well as the local Isaan community. Moreover, there was also a tendency to avoid other expatriates living in

Thailand. Marc especially expressed that he tried his best to avoid larger towns and cities in the area and limit his interaction with other western expatriates, feeling that they were often loud, arrogant and always right—“*alfa humans*” as he called them. For the group of European expats, I met whilst in the field, they too told me they rarely came to the more urbanised areas of Thailand as it was not “real life”, preferring to spend time in the countryside. It could be argued that to live in Isaan at all was a choice to isolate oneself from the West, the populations of Westerners being much smaller than the rest of Thailand and furthermore access to Western commodities being relatively poor.

In grouping these practices together, I argue that it is useful to conceptualise lifestyle migration as form of ‘informal social risk management’. By social risk management (SRM) I refer to the concept developed by Holzman and Jørgensen (2001) as a broadening of social protection strategies that seek to prevent, mitigate and cope with social risks. Although traditionally social risks have been associated with work and health (ibid, p. 532) I take a broader view here that encompasses social exclusion. Here I define social exclusion both to be both economic and social aspects that

“usually occurs as a combination of adverse social situations, for example, unemployment, unfavourable work situation, low earnings, poor health and/or living conditions, and the inability to build social networks.” (Benson and O'Reilly 2018, p. 126).

I therefore suggest, in support of findings from Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016), that the experiences prior to migration were a form of perceived social exclusion. In specifying above SRM as *informal* I refer simply to it being an action taken by the individual, rather than being implemented by the market or state. It therefore relates the ‘consumptive desires’ relevant to lifestyle migration, as migrants perceive economic and social factors in their lives to be undesirable. In other words, I argue interviewees ‘choose’ to migrate to Isaan to manage *perceived* experiences of social exclusion or ‘risk’ and create a life they feel they deserve. I stress the word perceived here as experiences vary widely, yet the outcome - migrating to Isaan - is the same. Thus, as the opening quote to this section infers, meaning is attached to ‘place’ (in this case Isaan) and thus seen as providing refuge from perceived social risks that are conversely attached to interviewees home countries. It thus helps to inform the consumptive desires relevant to lifestyle migration.

Just how effective lifestyle migration is as at mitigating and reducing these perceived social risks is debateable. Certainly, for those not able to claim a pension, work in Isan did not cover

the costs of the lifestyles they often envisioned living. Both Marc and Juha, had to go elsewhere to find work, either back to their home country or to work in another region of Thailand. Even in David's case, who teaches English from home and says he earns enough to live comfortably, the company that employed him was Chinese, making it difficult to open a Thai bank account and stay in Thailand permanently. Furthermore, Brendan admitted to feeling lonely at times in Isaan. Nevertheless, these barriers do not seem to overrule the experiences perceived back home. Rather, the barriers put in the way of achieving such these lifestyle migrations and the willingness to confront them, demonstrate the 'risks' interviewees were willing to overcome to create a new life in Isaan. Addressing these issues, begins to reveal the tensions between wider structural factors and migrants own agentic actions. This will be discussed further in the findings chapter.

Conclusion

Perceived experiences of social exclusion during interviewees life course trajectories has been shown to be relevant to their 'choice' to migrate. Such experiences varied widely, however, broadly speaking their migration was seen as a way to manage undesirable economic and social factors described as part of transitions and turning points in interviewees lives prior to migration. In migrating to Isaan interviewees emphasised the importance of new social networks made through their partners, family and local community. Further, opportunities to find meaningful work as well as a better work-life balance was also seen as important to three of the interviewee's migration. The next chapter will discuss the relevance of these social networks further as well as how Western men positioned themselves within Isaan.

Chapter 6: Building a community online

This chapter examines the online interaction of lifestyle migrant men in Isaan through expatriate Facebook groups (EFGs). Building off of the findings from the last chapter that highlighted the opposition between life back home and in Isaan, I use the term ‘farang’, the Thai term for foreigner, to further explore how expats in the region perceived themselves and their lives post migration. The chapter will thus give a brief overview of the day to day topics within the expatriate Facebook groups (EFGs). In doing so, it expands on the ‘meaning’ placed on Isaan related to migrants ‘consumptive desires’ through the content of online discussions: how they interact (the formal and informal rules for interaction, discussions or monologues) and how this relates to their lifestyle migrations. Finally, I discuss whether the social media interaction among the expats can be interpreted as a case of what Rheingold (1987, 1993) called a “virtual community”.

Isolated but still connected: community online

In the last chapter lifestyle migrations were argued to be a form of social risk management, used as a way to manage perceived social risks in interviewees home countries. Isaan was understood as a place that offered ‘better’ opportunities, as perceived by interviewees, in relation to their lives back home—in other words it presented what lifestyle migration so often refers to as ‘search for the good life’. To what degree the good life was achieved by interviewees, especially those unable to claim a pension, was debatable. For a number of the men I spoke with, opportunities outside of Isaan were relied upon to provide an income to support their lives in Isaan. In the case of Marc for example, who travelled home to Switzerland for three months of the year to work, or Juha who worked on the outskirts of Bangkok, or even David who lived permanently in Isaan all year round but worked for a Chinese company online. Nevertheless, of most importance to interviewees and many of the men I met in the field were the strong social networks they built with their partners, Isaan family and local community. Interestingly, many also suggested they tended to avoid other Westerners in general. As will be discussed later on, this stood in contrast to my fieldwork online in EFGs, where conversation between Westerners happened on a daily basis. These conversations included some of my interviewees, such as Marc, who told me they tried hard to avoid Westerners in their daily lives. Exploring these discussions, Western men’s actions online and their comments in the field of Isaan are used here as a way to highlight Western men perceived their lives in Isaan. The next section will give an overview of these topics of conversation.

Entering the virtual field

On a daily basis posts within EFGs spanned a variety of topics from the banal to the scandalous. Primarily members sought advice to questions such as the best places to eat in town, where to find Western food products or where to watch sporting events. Posts outside of the advice category were often more dramatic as members shared stories of life in Isaan. These included: encounters with dangerous animals, accounts of poorly executed and often dangerous work by Thai builders, horror stories of Westerners disappearing in the Isaan outback and heated discussions about politics both local and back home. All amassed a large number of responses in the comments section of these posts.

After writing my own post, explaining my position and project, and opening the question up as to why men were moving to the region, as well as inviting members meet in the field for face to face interviews, responses were overwhelmingly positive. Many simply said that they would be willing to meet in Thailand to talk or expressed an interest in talking more immediately through Facebook Messenger. Others offered to refer me on to individuals they knew living in the area after they themselves had left the area. One particular response stuck out, that sought to vindicate men in the region from perceived stigma,

“Lots of good guys from Norway living in north east Thailand. The general stigmatisation [sic] of people, is that we are all sitting in bars, and contribute to the country's prostitution. Will prove you wrong. Best of luck.”

The view that those outside of Thailand had a negative view of them was often a starting point for conversations. Many wished to share their story with me, wanting to “set the story” straight about how people perceived them, feeling the West had got the wrong idea of them. However, interestingly, as will be discussed below, these men did not simply see this stereotype as not existing, but merely not being true of those living in Isaan. This became most apparent in members use of the term ‘farang’ to describe others in the country.

The good and the bad: Farangs in Isaan

The Thai word for foreigner, “farang”, spelled using the roman alphabet, as mentioned earlier, refers to foreigners, usually white and Western. The word does not necessarily have negative connotations but is certainly used to mark a distinction between Thai and non-Thai nationals in many circumstances of life in Thailand. For example, from my own experiences in Thailand it was used on a daily basis usually in the most mundane of circumstances; when ordering food (as the amount of chili needed to be adjusted for a farang) or ordering a taxi (as the price was

often higher). It is perhaps not surprising that members of these Facebook groups would use the term to identify other Westerners in the country when it is used so frequently to distinguish foreigners. However, as I will discuss, not all farangs seemed to be “bad” and at times members of these groups would talk about farangs to describe themselves.

Living the rural life and the “bad” farang

My first encounter with perceptions of “bad farangs” came from my initial post within one of the Facebook groups. After stating my position as a master’s student writing a thesis on men emigrating to Isaan I received a number of interesting replies referring to farangs, mostly negative.

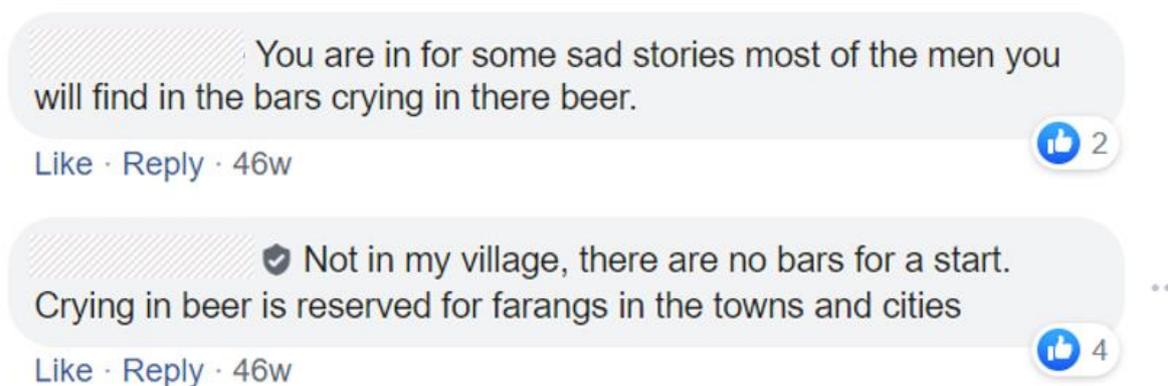


Figure 3 Comments from the expatriate group (1)

One such comment, seen above, also draws attention to the trope of the Western man sitting in the bar, similar to the message from the Norwegian man mentioned earlier. Yet this is contested by another man who draws a distinction to Westerners living in the smaller villages of Isaan and those living in more urban settings, echoing comments from the European men I spoke with in the last chapter, who saw the bar district of Udon Thani as “Disneyland”

The next comment below, also given in response to my original post, elaborates further on the connection these men had with a rural lifestyle.

“Wait, just a second. If I cooperate with this person, for whatever reason, and letz say it gets published. And letz say those of us who are here like it and find it pleasant and enjoy our Thai lovers, girl friends, wives, however you make your play here. Then others will see this and say, Wow, thatz for me. I should go to Thailand. Issan, in particular. And then what do we have. Well, it boggles the mind. I did not come here for finding love, or a woman, I came to do volunteer work. It just happened, that through a series

of weird happenstances, I ended up meeting someone I am quite enamored with. Now, that is great for me. But, I have spent some time in Nam Som ... and one of the things I like best about it is that there are very few farangs there. I went to the rain festival there a while back and amongst all the Thai folks, I counted 3 of us white beasts LOL. I kinda liked that. Not that I am opposed to others finding out what I am finding out, but I don't have to help it along, either. So, I think I will pass on this. Others can help, if they so desire. Itz like finding out a nice corner of the world, unspoiled and unsullied by Western influences. You write about it and the next thing you know that unspoiled, unsullied place is now a tourist hotel. I just won't take part in that. Shalom Cheers Aloha,"

In citing his reasons for not taking part in the thesis, for fear of revealing the region to other Westerners, the commenter (Steve), demonstrates his connection with the ruralness of the area and his lifestyle. Furthermore, the lack of farangs in the area in general is also cited as a positive for Steve.

Replies to Steve's comment rallied further support for keeping this rural area apart from other Westerners as the short conversation below that unfolded in the comments to his comment show (figure 4).

Figure 4 Comments from the expatriate group (2)

it's a very quiet town, if a new farang arrives we do find out very soon, and they are assessed 🤣
Like · Reply · 1y

assessed how much. 100,000, 200,000 what?
LOL
Like · Reply · 1y

I mean assessed on who is who, background. If an obvious bad one arrives, we would soon work it out. The Police look after us, and we look after them.
Like · Reply · 1y

Here farangs are directly described as being potentially “bad” and further as being assessed, by this individual (also a farang). Following on from such comments, is a suggestion that members felt a closer affinity to the local Isaan population, over bad farangs illustrated well in the somewhat sinister line of *“The Police look after us, and we look after them”* and Steve’s brief anecdote about a rain festival *“I went to the rain festival there a while back and amongst all the Thai folks, I counted 3 of us white beasts LOL. I kinda liked that.”*

Building on these comments, a sense that Isaan was different from the rest of Thailand was also expressed, in relation to the surroundings, but also in regard to the people in comments such as:

“I have a question are there good regular Thai girls in [Isaan] or are they like on [sic] Pattaya I have a friend in Jomtien wonderful girl we are just friends but I do not see that going anywhere any advice would be helpful y’all have been giving me good advice for when I come”

This particular post generated a lot of replies (64 comments), and mainly discussed the “good values” of Isaan women compared to those working in Pattaya, a major destination for Western tourists and retirees. Members asked what kind of qualities he was looking for, to which the reply was “honourable” alluding to the fact that Thai women from Pattaya were often the opposite. Much of the conversation revolved around being careful with money, and whether or not this was as much of an issue with women from Isaan. Many suggested that women from Isaan were much more suitable for a long-term relationship “not just a one-night stand”. As well as this, there were a number of men that criticised such comments as objectifying the women. Nevertheless, the general consensus seemed to be that women (or girls as they were often referred to as) were much more suited to a long-term relationship in Isaan than in the more tourist centred areas, especially Pattaya. The irony of this is that many of the Thai women working in Pattaya are from the Isaan region, often working in the sex tourism industry due to their poor social and economic status in Isaan (Lapanun 2012).

Other comments regarding relationships with Isaan partners simply celebrated their success, especially in circumstances where they expressed settled lives in small communities. For example one man who, posted a number of pictures of his life with his Isaan wife and family in a small village outside of Udon Thani, wrote:

“Ten years married and still going strong. Just thought I’d share a happy story of an old farang as there are so many sad ones out there”

This gained a huge amount of attention (176 replies) all of which praising him on his achievements in regard to his house and relationship with his partner.

In contrast comments of members suggesting they were unhappy in secluded locations met immediate disapproval. One member who described feelings of isolation, feeling alone in his Isaan small village garnered 176 comments (at the time of reading), a relatively high number, most of which either stated commenters enjoyment of such an isolated lifestyle (separated from other farangs) or advised that he got used to it and tried to integrate better into the community by learning the language or helping his Thai family.

Another example came from a man who explained the difficulties he was facing obtaining Western food in the supermarkets of Isaan, having to travel to Bangkok at times or have products imported. After going through the trouble to get these items he voiced his frustration after finding that the next day his Isaan family had eaten it all. Although seemingly mundane, the post gathered a large number of comments (68) and divided opinion as to whether or not the man should share his food. A number of members supported him and agreed that his family should “*respect his property*”, others saw it as selfish and told him he should be grateful to live with them. One diplomatic commenter suggested he buy a miniature fridge to keep “*farang food in*” that he could hide in his bedroom.

Many seemed to share a vision of living as far away from larger towns and cities as possible and talk of going “off grid” – a term that referred to becoming as self-sufficient as possible; producing their own electricity, growing their own food and having a private water supply - was a topic that came up on more than one occasion in EFGs. This would generate lengthy discussions between the members, where the men would share tips as to the best way to build a self-sufficient home, often on farmland owned by their Thai partner. Such visions of a rural life were surprising to me, as they seemed far from the stereotype of the retiree, settling down in a luxury condominium in the south of the country. Indeed, this seemed exactly the kind of lifestyle these men were desperately trying to avoid, searching rather for something “authentic”, “the simple life” closer to nature. This sentiment was reflected best in the description of one of the EFGs in the ‘About’ section of their Facebook page shown below.

“Surrounded by mountains and comprised of mostly farms, Isaan is the biggest region in Thailand. It is an ideal destination for those wanting to get back to nature. The “Real” Thailand. Prices in Isaan are inexpensive and the people are some of the friendliest people in the world. Make friends in the Isaan and show pictures where you have been.”

However, a vision of “getting back to nature” is not uncommon in lifestyle migration literature. For example, Michaela Benson’s (2012) study of British lifestyle migration to France, suggested their migration was influenced by culturally informed perceptions of the ‘rural idyll’ that reflected migrants ideas surrounding community, work ethic and morals (p. 1688). In moving to France, they stated they often felt they were able to get back to a way of life that had been lost in the UK, where strong communities existed, and people still knew their neighbours. This has clear similarities to comments made by Western men in Isaan, often shown to emphasise the importance of the strong social networks created with the local community and their Isaan families. Rather than the good farang then I suggest EFGs stress, implicitly, the importance of being a “rural farang”. Following on from this I suggest these lifestyle migrants draw on themes of rural masculinity that are reinforced through discussions online in EFGs.

Despite this sense of belonging towards the local Isaan community, members would also refer to themselves as farangs in a positive manner at times. This would often reveal differences in their lives between themselves and the local Isaan communities often marked by external factors. Most commonly were posts relating to help with visas, Thus, in this regard Western men appear to separate themselves from the local Isaan community where their lives were clearly different from their friends and family.

Visas

These discussions could begin with administrators to the groups posting content on the group wall regarding changes to visa applications for various nationalities. However, members would also often bring their own personal problems with the process, asking for advice or using the opportunity to voice their annoyance towards the process. Interestingly, many of these posts were addressing similar questions or reiterating questions from earlier posts within the same week or even the same day, yet members appeared to be quite happy to continue to answer such queries despite the repetition. On occasions administrators would intervene, sharing links for older posts with information dealing with visa regulations, but this seemed to have little effect on the amount of visa related posts proceeding these updates. Further, the amount of contradictory information given in the comments, often anecdotally from members, often only succeeded in confusing matters in regard to solving the original question. I was not the only member to think this, with one commenter on such a post stating his frustrations towards others sharing information who were not “100% sure of the facts”, leading him to share a link to a

site that clearly stated the visa guidelines. This did little to deter others from commenting further however, asking more about the original author of the post's situation, despite the initial question being solved.

Again, as experiences with employment revealed in the last chapter, dealing with the realities of these political and global regulations begins to reveal tensions between perceived lives in Isaan and the factors that limit and constrain them.

Western men in Isaan as an online community

The discussions within EFGs above give an interesting insight into the lives of Western men living in Isaan. Relevant to the thesis, they show how these Western men seem to be stress the importance of a rural lifestyle and often living relatively secluded lives away from other Westerners. Yet ironically this lifestyle appears to be mediated through an 'online community' made up of exclusively of Western men. As such I see these men as making a distinction between their online lives and their lives in the 'real world' living in Isaan.

In describing these Facebook groups as an online community, I refer first to Benedict Anderson's concept of an "imagined community" to better expand upon the idea. Although Anderson himself used the concept of an imagined community as a way to explain the idea of the nation state, the idea of applying the term to online communities is not new. The concept was used as early as 1984 by Gene Youngblood to describe online communities and was then further expanded upon by Howard Rheingold in 1987. Rheingold describes online communities or "virtual communities" as he puts it as "*social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.*" (p. 1993).

Two major pillars of the concept imagined communities are seen as most important here. First, his assertion that such a community is "*imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.*" (1991, p. 3). In relation to the online community of Facebook members, there is a clear parallel here in that members are communicating over social media and so may quite literally never meet but further, many members of these groups do not necessarily take part in discussions or interact with other members despite being able to view posts and so do not even meet "virtually". Secondly, Anderson describes imagined communities as, "*limited because even the largest of them,*

encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.” (Anderson, 1991, p.3). In this sense I see this as referring both to the physical boundaries of Isaan, as well as the more elastic definitions surrounding the good and bad farang which imposes a degree of limitation on who can be included within the community of farangs in Isaan. Further, boundaries between rural and urban as discussed at the end of the last section are also seen as relevant here.

Building on this Al-Rawi (2017) suggests that Facebook “*functions as a virtual nation because the platform provides the community members with a much needed sense of identity and belonging to an imagined place that they sometimes long for.*” (p. 9). In other words, he suggests through Facebook groups, members are able to create their own perception of their host nation for themselves. Facebook was also shown to facilitate a space for immigrants to criticise and compare home countries with their host country, as I have also observed among expat groups in Isaan, who compare life in the region with larger expat enclaves as well as their home nations.

Thus, by sharing experiences through Facebook groups set up for those living Isaan, I argue this has resulted in the creation of online communities, that help to foster a sense of identity for these Western men in the foreign landscape of Isaan. Vital to this is the perception of ruralness and perceptions of the term *farang*. Identifying in such a way within the context of Isaan, allowed them to both simultaneously separate themselves from Westerners in the rest of the country as well as address differences between themselves and the local Isaan population.

Concluding comments

This chapter has outlined the daily discussions of Western men in expatriate Facebook groups for those living in Isaan. In focussing on these discussions, I have drawn attention to the way in which members often emphasise the importance of rural lifestyles and the negative perception of the ‘farang’. These online communities thus help to mediate and inform how such lives “should” be lived and result in the perception of what I am calling the ‘rural farang’.

Chapter 7: Findings and Discussion

At the beginning of the thesis I set out to explore the driving factors behind migration from the West to the rural region of Isaan, Thailand for Western men. Of particular interest were reports of ‘social isolation’ among Western men in their home countries prior to leaving (Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016). However, these experiences, however, were only mentioned in passing by Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016) and had yet to be fully explored. To address this and enable me to better understand the factors involved in migrating to Isaan, I collected data during ethnographic fieldwork through participant observation and semi structured interviews with ten Western men living in Isaan. Interviewees came from the UK, America, Australia, Ireland, Switzerland, Germany, Finland and Spain. As well as this, ‘virtual fieldwork’ was undertaken online in expatriate Facebook groups (EFGs) set up for those living in Isaan. I focussed only on Western men that had a settled life in Isaan, meaning that that they had a property and a place to permanently place to stay. All bar one had permanent residence status.

Exploring factors relevant *prior* to migration I conceptualised the migration as a temporal phenomenon, i.e. I focussed on events before interviewees migrated to Isaan. The data is therefore highly reliant on life course interviews relayed through interviewees as to the conditions prior to migration. This was particularly useful in highlighting so called ‘turning points’ (momentous events in interviewees’ lives) and ‘life course trajectories’ that were often stated by interviewees as the impetus for their migration to Isaan. Broadly speaking, I framed these issues as relating to ‘community’, in regard to family and friends, and employment, especially in the ability to find ‘meaningful’ work in the ‘everyday’.

Given these migrations were perceived by interviewees as a way to mitigate undesirable circumstances in their home countries I further argue this is a form of social risk management, as perceived and presented by the interviewees. This finding is based on the subjective data presented by my interviewees and how they accounted for events in their life themselves. Whether the migration actually led to improvements in their objective living conditions is an unanswered question as I do not have objective documentary evidence other than their subjective reports.

Underpinning the thesis have been three main theoretical perspectives: 1) lifestyle migration to better conceptualise their status as ‘expats’ 2) gender, as the lifestyle migration phenomena

appeared to be exclusively male and 3) a life-course perspective that helped analyse the temporal process of migration. To bring these various perspectives together I also adopted Karen O'Reilly's model of practice theory. The rest of the chapter will discuss the findings from the thesis in relation to these theoretical perspectives.

What were the relevant factors in migration to Isaan? External and internal structures

To address this question, I return to the practice theory framework presented in chapter 2 focussing on the external and internal structures that frame migrations. In structuring the findings in this way, I have attempted to operationalise the practice theory to reflect the ways in which external and internal structures as well as practices have resulted in outcomes reflected in interviewees life course histories and online data (see table 2 below).

	A External structures	B Internal structures	C Practices	D Outcomes
Perspective	Outside	Inside	Inside	Inside
	<p>Postcolonial structures *ICT development (information and communication across borders) * Globalisation of the economy (cross-national money transfers) * International cooperation (VISA regulations, diplomatic relations) *number of expats/ foreign citizens registered as residents in Thailand</p> <p>Economic conditions Strength of Western currencies to the Thai bath Availability of paid work in home country and in Thailand Eligibility to and transportability of social security (unemployment</p>	<p>Length of experience and ways of coping with risks in home country and in Thailand: * Family obligations *Finding and retaining work *Residency permit * Housing *Differing cultural norms/expectations</p> <p>Dispositions, established ways of seeing and doing, taken-for-grants;</p> <p>Conjuncturally-specific internal structures *Perceptions and judgments of self and others; Knowledge, skills, competence; *Reactions to existing patterns of roles, norms and power relations;</p>	<p>Employment patterns (full/part-time/ seasonal, temporary/permanent, in Isaan/Bangkok/ home country)</p> <p>Use of public services *from the embassy/ consulate/ in home country *from Thai government</p> <p>Use of social media Instrumental (goal oriented) /expressive (identity, who we are)</p> <p>Interaction *with other expats * with Western tourists *with Thai people / natives *with family and friends in home country</p>	<p><u>Stability or change in:</u> *Degree of economic freedom, as experienced by the person; *meaningful work, as experienced by the person</p> <p>Improved / deteriorated *standard of living, as perceived by the person; *residency situation, as perceived by the person</p> <p><u>Shift towards</u> inclusion in Thai family and community life, as perceived by the person; Knowledge of Thai culture and language, as perceived by the person In how Thai people view them, as perceived by the person</p>

	benefits, disability benefits or old age pensions) Family relations Family responsibilities (parents, children, married/ divorced)	Critical awareness about external and internal structures, their impact in the past and prospects for the future	Social acceptance or stigma related to moving to Thailand, as perceived by person Experience with finding community in Thailand as perceived by person Participation in efforts to *improve legal regulations (taxation/visa) of importance for expats *help and assist other expats	<u>Stability or change in:</u> *what they do for and together with their Thai family and/or friends *what is expected of them as men, as perceived by the person
Data sources	Documentary material and literature, in-depth interviews with expats and social media	Documentary material and literature, in-depth interviews and online fieldwork	In-depth interviews and online fieldwork, Documentary material	In-depth interviews and online fieldwork

Table 2: Operationalisations of Western men's migration to Isaan using Practice theory

External structures

In the broader context, interviewees described external structures of global processes, at the meso level, perceived as opportunities and constraints to their life in Isaan. Of major importance to many were the strong economic advantages – from savings and earnings outside of Thailand brought to Isaan – that enabled interviewees to create a ‘better life’. Evidence of this comes from interviewees comments, as well as the discussions I observed online within EFGs, stating the cheap cost of living in Isaan in combination with work outside of the region as a major ‘pull’ to the region.

This was set in opposition to life back home – described during life history interviews and participant observation data from EFGs – especially in regard to income and employment opportunities. For a number of interviewees, prior to migrating they had felt employment opportunities were poor, providing little meaning, money or time to enjoy themselves. This was often exemplified in comments stating that emigrating to the region gave them ‘freedom’. For example, in Marc’s comment “*Last day of capitalistic slavery, glad it is over today. Coming home tomorrow*” posted on Facebook the day before leaving after his latest stretch of work in Switzerland. Furthermore, as time went on interacting with interviewees and engaging online in the EFGs, a general pattern of dissatisfaction with life in the West became evident.

As well as this, the ability to obtain a visa to live in Thailand on a permanent basis was of clear importance to facilitating migrations. Visa regulations were often a point of contention among members of expat groups online, seen as imposing limitations on their ability to attain their desired lifestyles, many feeling their permanent status in the region was at times precarious. Nevertheless, such discussions within EFGs, highlight the relevance of visas to these men's lives in Isaan through their awareness of such laws and regulations. To what extent visa laws enabled and limited their ability to live in Isaan perhaps presents room for further study, although it has been highlighted by Howard (2009) as leaving some Western migrants in a precarious circumstance, in cases where migrants no longer hold any assets in the West.

Closer to the ground, turning points in interviewees life course histories described more proximate layers of external structures (O'Reilly 2012, p. 19) relevant to their migration. Broadly speaking, these turning points related to events that marked the breakdown of community back home – specifically divorce, from previous partners or of interviewees' parents and the loss of close friends – involvement with drugs and reaching the age of retirement. A perceived breakdown of community in particular seemed common, six out of the ten stating it as a reason for their move. In reference to my initial research question, this seems to support findings from the Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016) article, that found many men in Isaan had felt some form of social isolation in their home countries.

Internal structures

The interviewees internal structures were partly reflected in their practices and partly in how they presented their life opportunities, their scope for agency, and values and life goals they pursued. Structuration theory emphasises that agents often conceptualise their problems, understandings, interpretations and habits in a taken-for-granted manner. To reiterate, *internal structures* within the agent include his or her more lasting dispositions, world views, as well as his or her more situated and time-dependent interpretation, learning, ways of thinking and responding. By collecting data on how they presented themselves in Isaan and on Facebook, through interviews and participant observation I have achieved a rich data set on what they value in life and how they think about their life-opportunities, not least in how they described life in Isaan in contrast to their life in their home country, but also how they compare themselves with Western tourists and with Thai men.

From the background literature in the introduction chapter, culturally informed matrilineal and matrilocal practices of Isaan women – so called 'daughter duties' – have been cited as

influential in Western men's migration to the region (L. Angeles 2009, Esara 2009, Sunanta and Angeles 2013, Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt 2016). Indeed, the external structures above do not necessarily explain how or why interviewees chose to live in Isaan, rather than any other region of Thailand. Adding support to this then, the influence of these local dispositions held by Isaan women were undoubtedly important in my interviewees' migration to Isaan, as out of the ten men interviewed eight of them moved after meeting their partner outside of the region. All but one interviewee had since settled in the area with a partner from Isaan.

Interestingly, comments from interviewees suggested that they were aware of their desirable status as partners able to provide, through anecdotes their Thai partners had told them. Such stories often described local Isaan men as alcoholics, lazy and bad fathers.

Conversely, the local community of Isaan in general was described positively as 'traditional', 'hardworking' and of 'good morals', especially during discussions within the EFGs. In relation to the practice theory framework, I see this as revealing particular dispositions held by many men in the region, that seemed to glorify rural lifestyles. Such dispositions were particularly visible during conversations about their partner's families as well as the local women, exemplified in chapter 5 with comments such as, "*It's like the 1950's here still, you know your neighbour*" or "*There is still a close knit community here*", and "*Everybody helps each other*". Further, these sentiments seemed to be conflated with feelings of attaining freedom from the West that related to work and community, described above in external structures, that led to the two often being described in opposition to each other. Here I draw parallels to other lifestyle migration literature, where 'counter urbanisation', that describes relatively privileged migration from city to the countryside, seem to underpin migrants' decisions to move. For example, British lifestyle migrants living in the rural Lot region of France described by Michaela Benson (2012). Here, Benson argues the draw to rural France was driven, in part, by middle class cultural frameworks that "*promotes rural France as the geographical emplacement of the Arcadian dream: the rural idyll*" (p. 1688). The same cultural frameworks do not exist in the case of Isaan however, as stated, the majority of the interviewees had no knowledge of the region before meeting their partners. Instead, I suggest interviewees' perceptions of the region demonstrate the emergence of conjuncturally-specific internal structures that describe the ways in which individuals alter and adapt previously held dispositions in the face of new and unknown circumstances. In other words, in moving to rural Isaan, especially in cases where it was not planned, Western men are making sense of

unfamiliar circumstance to understand what life in Isaan means to them. These conjuncture-specific internal structures are thus seen as a way to create meaning within their migrations and justify their rural lifestyles in Isaan.

To summarise, the last two short sections, I suggest here that Western men's capital, both economic and cultural, frame migrations along with turning points in life course histories. Negative experiences prior to migration are being utilised alongside dispositions regarding rural lifestyle to justify migrations to Isaan.

Practices and outcomes

Post migration, following on from sentiments of Isaan as the rural idyll, interviewees were highly active within the local communities they lived in—eating Thai food, socialising with neighbours and their partner's extended family, helping harvest crops from family farmland, and using their own earnings to help expand and build homes for themselves and partner. These practices that described the 'everyday', i.e. the daily actions and practices of interviewees, appeared to be tacitly understood by Western men throughout the region as what was 'expected' of them. As such, from the perspective of practice theory, I see them as constituting so called communities of practice (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 31). Communities of practice here does not describe a community in the sense of the local Isaan community above, but rather the 'roles' in which these men are expected to act on a daily basis. Such roles appear to revolve around creating a perceived sense of identity with the local Isaan people, through the practices listed above. Enforcing these practices were online discussions within EFGs. For example, posts displaying pictures of Isaan family and friends or recent improvements to houses as well as stories of successful marriages that subsequently gathered large numbers of positive comments and praise. Conversely, posts suggesting life in Isaan was not great were often heavily criticised. This seems to be in contrast to research done on other areas of Thailand regarding Western migrants, who choose to live in expatriate enclaves and do not necessarily socialise with the surrounding Thai community (Jaisuekun and Sunanta 2016). By enacting these practices, Western men were often described as 'good farangs' in the EFGs and 'bad farangs' if they diverged or abstained from such practices. Further, as was mentioned above in the external structures section a general mistrust of the West was prevalent in among Western men in the region

The outcomes of such practices then, at least in the perception of interviewees and EFGs, was a perceived inclusion within their local community and family. The extent of this perceived inclusion varied from interviewee to interviewee, and further seemed to mean more or less depending on feelings of social exclusion back home. For David and Marc for example, who had had little family or community support before leaving their home country, their newly found Isaan community was important to their migration and choosing to settle in the region. For Brendan, on the other hand who had ties to family back home and community elsewhere in Thailand, he admitted to feeling lonely sometimes, despite enjoying his life with his partner and extended family. At least four of the interviewees claimed to have a good grasp of the Thai language as well as the Isaan dialect, some taking language classes other learning by themselves and from their partners.

Practices and outcomes: doing masculinity in Isaan

At the beginning of the thesis I saw the phenomenon of Western men migrating to Isaan as a highly gendered case. It was after all, an almost exclusive male phenomena and furthermore rooted in the general public's imagination as a form of marriage migration where older Western men travel to Thailand in search of a younger Thai wife. Indeed, findings from the Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt (2016) suggest that Western men in Isaan are actively trying to disassociate themselves from such stereotypes, moving from a liminal space of 'sex tourist' to become 'son-in-laws' to their Isaan families.

It is here I see lifestyle migration and gender intersect as communities of practice discussed above are seen in this context, not only as guiding Western men as to how to act as a migrant in Isaan, but further, as describing power structures between Western men and their home countries as well as with the local community. In this sense, lifestyle migration is seen as a way of 'doing masculinity' (West and Zimmerman 1987), used to escape the constraints of gender norms back home and empower migrants in their new position as Western men in Isaan. This is perhaps most evident in Western men's perceived opposition to Isaan men – described as bad husbands and fathers by their Isaan partners (Esara 2009) – as well as other Western men in Thailand perceived as the 'sex tourist' (ibid). Implicit in such oppositions are notions of the breadwinner model, that create expectations of providing for the family.

Only one of my interviewees told of previous experiences with sex tourism, however, more than half had had previous relationships with Thai partners elsewhere in the country that had ended after interviewees stated they realised they were being used for money. Often related to

such experiences, online, they seemed to be a consensus among EFGs that women from Isaan were of a higher moral standing than Thai women elsewhere in the country, especially the larger Western enclaves, such as Pattaya and Bangkok.

Therefore, I see my own findings of Western men's identity as the 'rural farang' as analogous to the 'transient masculinity' of 'son in law', but add further nuance to it, suggesting that these gendered practices are part of a wider life course trajectory influenced by the external and internal structures discussed above that relate to employment and community.

Conclusions

Explanations of Western men's migration to Thailand are often framed around their relationships with Thai women. As expressed above, I do not discount relationships with Isaan (Thai) women as an important factor within the choice to migrate to the area—indeed, many of the men living in Isaan settled in the region only after meeting their partners. My own research, which did not specifically focus on relationships as a driver of migration, sought to explore broader, 'consumptive' motivations behind migration drawing from previous research on 'lifestyle migration'. Thus, I propose that such "cultural imaginings" as Benson (2012) puts it and cultural biases are not necessarily fixated solely upon the role of Isaan women but further encompasses 'lifestyle', that more importantly involves idealised notions of the rural countryside, as well as community, family and work-life balance. In short, consumptive desires described by lifestyle migration are imposed onto migrations and understood as coalescing in the imaginations of these men beyond their relationship with Thai women, expanding further into the realms of family, community and rural living. Thus, for my interviewees a distinct identity shaped by lifestyle migration in the pursuit of a "better way of life" is incorporated into a broader lifestyle trajectory.

However, much of these findings draw off of the perceptions and experiences of interviewees, that are subjective in nature. Interviewees own narratives of life trajectories that pivot around turning points may well be *post hoc* in their justification, given in reaction to my own questions as to their path to Isaan. Regardless of this, these perceptions are useful in understanding the outcomes of such migrations, especially in how conjuncturally-specific external structures influence social practices emerge post migration.

Whether or not interviewees' lives really changed for the better is debateable, as often incomes, be it from pensions or work in Isaan, did not cover the costs such lifestyles required. As a

consequence, many of the men I met had to go abroad (often back to their home countries) or to work in another region of Thailand to find work that provided a sufficient income. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily interrupt the emphasis put upon community, family and traditional values perceived as existing in rural villages that were important in the wider picture of life course trajectories.

Beyond the findings of the thesis, I believe there is scope for further research on the relevant factors to migration. Focussing on lifestyle migration allowed me to explore the ways in which Western men imparted meaning onto their migrations through contrasting it to their lives back home. In relying so heavily on subjective experience however, the main findings have related to the 'practices' of these men. As a consequence, I fail to capture how and why these perceptions arise. As such, research exploring the external and internal structures relevant to these men's lives prior to migration is needed. In doing so, the constraints perceived in finding meaningful work in the West as well as the experiences perceived as social exclusion in the breakdown of community could be better understood in their influence upon lifestyle migrations. Relevant to this I suspect are factors surrounding 'class'. Further, although gender had always been in the back of my mind when conducting fieldwork, I feel I did not manage to capture its relevance as much as I would have liked.

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