การแต่งงานข้ามพรมแดน และการเคลื่อนชั้นทางสังคมและเศรษฐกิจ ของการย้ายถิ่นของคนไทยในประเทศออสเตรีย

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้กล่าวถึงปรากฏการณ์ของการแต่งงานข้ามพรมแดน โดยนำเสนอกรณีศึกษาของการย้ายถิ่นจากการแต่งงานของคนไทยในประเทศออสเตรีย ประการแรก บทความนี้ทบทวนวรรณกรรมของงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความก้าวหน้าทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคมในบริบท การย้ายถิ่น อันเนื่องมาจากการตกงาน บทบาททางสังคม วัฒนธรรม และความคาดหวังที่มีต่อผู้ที่ย้ายถิ่น จากการแต่งงานทั้งในประเทศไทย และของชุมชนชาวไทยในยุโรป ประการที่สอง การใช้ระเบียบวิธีการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพและเชิงปริมาณ (การศึกษานี้ตรวจสอบว่าการย้ายถิ่นเพราะการแต่งงานได้ช่วยส่งเสริมการเลื่อนชั้นทางสังคมที่สูงขึ้นหรือไม่) โดยเปรียบเทียบจากตัวชี้วัดทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคม เช่น ทักษะด้านภาษา การศึกษา อาชีพและรายได้ทั้งก่อนและหลังการย้ายถิ่น ผลการศึกษาเบื้องต้น แสดงเป็นนัยว่าผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามส่วนใหญ่ยอมรับว่า การแต่งงานมีส่วนสัมพันธ์กับการย้ายถิ่นและส่งผลเป็นอย่างยิ่งเกี่ยวกับการทำให้ชีวิตมีความเป็นอยู่ที่ดีขึ้น การแต่งงานเพราะการย้ายถิ่นส่งผลต่อเกิดความสำเร็จทางด้านเศรษฐกิจ ซึ่งไม่เพียงแต่จะช่วยเกื้อหนุนให้ชีวิตของกลุ่มผู้ที่แต่งงานเองเท่านั้น แต่ยังส่งผลให้ครอบครัวที่อยู่เบื้องหลังอีกด้วย โดยชีวิตความเป็นอยู่ที่ดีขึ้นนั้น กลับพบว่าต้องพึ่งพาอาศัยสามีชาวต่างชาติช่วยเหลืออยู่บ่อยครั้ง อย่างไรก็ตาม ก็ยังไม่สามารถที่จะชี้ชัดได้ว่าประสบการณ์ของกลุ่มที่ย้ายถิ่นเพราะการแต่งงานจะมีการเจริญก้าวหน้าทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคมที่ดีขึ้นเหมือนกันไปทั้งหมด เพราะว่ายังคงมีตัวอย่างที่แสดงให้เห็นถึงการเลื่อนชั้นทางเศรษฐกิจหรือทางสังคมที่ลดลง เนื่องมาจากการย้ายถิ่นเพราะการแต่งงานเช่นกัน

คำสำคัญ: การย้ายถิ่นของคนไทย การย้ายถิ่นเพราะการแต่งงาน การย้ายถิ่นและการเคลื่อนชั้นทางสังคมและเศรษฐกิจ การย้ายถิ่นของผู้หญิง การแต่งงานข้ามพรมแดน

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Cross–border Marriages and Socioeconomic Mobility of Thai migrants in Austria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the phenomenon of cross–border marriages by presenting the case of Thai marriage migrants in Austria. First, the article is based on a literature review on socioeconomic advancements in (marriage) migration contexts, on socio–cultural roles of and expectations towards marriage migrants in Thailand, and on Thai communities in Europe. Second, deploying qualitative and quantitative methods, this study investigates whether marriage migration promotes upward mobility by comparing socioeconomic indicators such as language skills, formal education, occupation, and income before and after the migration. Preliminary results suggest that the majority of respondents agree that their marriage–related migration has improved their life. Marriage migrants achieve economic advancement which allows them to support their life and the one of their left behind families but these material betterments often rely on their husband's support and thus create dependencies. Bet, marriage migrants' experiences cannot be described as homogeneous as examples of economic or social downward mobility demonstrate.

Keywords: Thai migration, Marriage migration, Migration and Socioeconomic mobility, Female migration, Cross–border marriages

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Introduction

Over the last decades, cross–cultural marriages between Thai women and Western men and their decision to migrate overseas have become evident. A survey conducted by the Thai National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) in 2003–2004 found that almost 20,000 women in 19 provinces in Thailand's Northeastern region (Isan) married Western men and that those living abroad send remittances back to Thailand worth 1.5 million baht per year (NESDB, 2004). A few years later in 2008, the Thai newspaper *Khom–Chad–Luek* published an article about future dreams of girls in a kindergarten in Northeastern Thailand which included the aspiration of a four–year old child who would like to become a *mia farang* (wife of a Westerner) in order to become rich and own a big house (Khom–Chad–Luek 2008; Butratana & Trupp, 2014). This way, cross–border marriages are viewed as a hypergamous strategy in order to advance one's own (and one's family's) socioeconomic status. Indeed, existing scholarly work has identified the affluence gap between developed and less–developed countries as one potential driver for international marriage migration. On a global scale, the majority of international marriage migrants are female and follow a Global South to Global North migration pattern mirroring female labor migration (Constable, 2011; Piper & Roces, 2004). Thadani and Todaro (1979) argue that economic betterment and status mobility is one of the drivers of women's marriage related migration.

However, motivations and decisions for marriage migration are for more complex and relate to a variety of emotional, social, economic, and cultural factors (Butratana & Trupp, 2014; Constable, 2011; Mai & King, 2009; Mix & Piper, 2004) which "make it unlikely that a clear and definitive articulation of motivation for marriage choices would be possible or useful" (Williams, 2012, p. 29). Rather than solely focusing why Thai women decided to marry and live abroad, this article also examines the question how Thai marriage migrants' social and economic situations changes in the destination area. In this article, we review literature on socioeconomic advancements in (marriage) migration contexts, discuss socio–cultural roles of and expectations towards marriage migrants in Thailand, and introduce the case of Thai migration to Austria. Finally, we elucidate empirical data about Thai migrant women's socioeconomic gain in terms of language skills, formal education, occupation and income before and after the migration.

Generally, the majority of research conducted on Thai–Western relationships has been carried out in Thailand and not in the migration destination areas. A significant number of these studies highlights the role of women's involvement in sex work (Askew, 1998; Cohen, 1982; Cohen, 2003), investigates the role of matching and marriage agency (Angeles and Sunanta, 2007; Zimmermann, 2014) or focuses on the motivations of marriage migrants and the socioeconomic impacts of such relations and marriages on the migrant's home region (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2012;

Tosakul, 2010; Sunanta & Angeles, 2013). Another strand of literature examines the phenomenon by focusing on the Western partner's motivation, integration (Howard, 2008; Husa, Vielhaber, Jöstl, Veress, & Wieser, 2014) and on "Thailand as an imagined space of masculine transformation" (Lafferty & Mahler, 2014).

Research on Thai communities in Europe emphasized a highly feminized migration pattern which is mainly linked to marriage–related mobility. Studies in this context investigate the motivations of Thai women marrying across borders (Ruenkaew, 2009; Sims, 2012; Suksomboon, 2009), the economic and social remittances they send back home (Suksomboon, 2008), the increase of binational marriages in Sweden (Haandrikman, 2014), the impacts of policy changes on Thai population in Iceland (Bisaat, 2013), and sex–work related migration (Lisborg, 2002; Mix & Piper, 2004). While a female dominated marriage–related migration constitutes the prevailing Thai migration pattern to Europe, Kanchanachitra, Niyomsilpa, and Punpuing (2014) as well as Butratana and Trupp (2014) point to other relevant types of Thai outbound movements such as labor migration, educational migration, and temporary visits.

Introducing the case of Thai marriage migrants in Austria, this paper investigates whether marriage migration promotes upward mobility. We seek to dismantle simplistic notions about hypergamy and present preliminary qualitative and quantitative data that question common assumptions about passivity or desperation of Thai brides living abroad. We compare socioeconomic indicators such as language skills, formal education, occupation, and income before and after the migration and analyze migrants' experiences in the destination area, Austria.

This paper is part of an ongoing PhD research project titled "Ventures of business and love. Thai female migration to Austria" of one of the authors who is a Thai female migrant herself. The author has been carrying out fieldwork using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods among Thai migrants in Austria and their left–behind families in Thailand. Preliminary results presented in this paper draw on a survey of 85 Thai women aged between 23 and 77 who live and are married in Austria. In addition, one of the authors carried out 30 in–depth interviews with Thai marriage migrants and conducted participant observation in Thai temples, the migrants' home and work places, Thai restaurants, bars, and Thai festivals in Austria.

Statistik Austria (2013) registered 4,041 Thai citizens in Austria whereas more than 80% of them (3,507) were female. In addition, there are 1,099 migrants who were born in Thailand but obtained Austrian citizenship (Statistik Austria, 2010).

Marrying up and marrying down

Research in the field of gender and immigration has asked what and how women advance or lose through international migration. The cross–border marriage migration between Thai women and men from more affluent countries has been described as a way for Thai females to escape from economic deprivation (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013). In Thailand, this picture has especially been ascribed to women from Isan, the northeastern region of the county, which is characterized as economically disadvantaged (Lapunan, 2012; Sunanta, 2014; Tosakul, 2010).

This phenomenon is often referred to as hypergamy which generally relates to 'marrying up' and was defined "as a practice of marrying men of equal or greater wealth and status. In human beings and most kinds of social animals, it is the females who move upward through their choice of mate" (Wilson, 1978, p. 39). Similar definitions are provided by van der Berghe (1960) referring to hypergamy as a form of marriage in which a woman marries a man of higher social status than her own, or better, than that of her family of orientation. According to Rose (2004) marrying up implies a better life in terms of social status, education, income, and other characteristics associated with economic well–being. This commonly used definition of hypergamy bears several problematic or paradoxical issues. First, it assumes that women are the ones who marry up (Constable, 2003) Second, it implies that women may benefit from joining a higher status family in economic terms but neglects the fact that they move down in social terms. Due to existing stereotypes such as of the 'mail–order bride' (Sims, 2012) or other general prejudices, female marriage migrants may be looked down upon by parts of the mainstream society or family members in the migrant destination area. In addition, even though women may move from a developing or transforming countr to a more developed one, they do not necessarily move up along the economic ladder. Living and consumption expenses for accommodation, food, entertainment or perceived luxury articles can be higher in relation to the new income in the migrant's destination area. Moreover, qualifications may not be accredited and jobs not continued as in one's home country. It is thus possible that people plan to have a better live after cross–border migration but that this move eventually leads to worse socioeconomic or emotional situations. Such examples indicate that marriage migration involves a number of paradoxes (Freeman, 2005):

To assume that such marriages are simply upward is to overlook hot only the contradictory and paradoxical social and economic patterns that are not necessarily linked to geographic mobility buy aiso interesting underlying questions about gender (Constable, 2005, p. 10).

Marriage and subsequent migration decisions in Asian contexts are influenced by sociocultural and economic expectations of the family (Palriwala & Uberio, 2008; Yang & Lu, 2010). In the regional Thai context, studies frequently refer to the 'daughter's duty' as a "culturally specific gender role largely performed by women to meet familial and community obligations" (Angeles & Sunanta 2009, p. 554; also see Lapanun, 2012; Mills, 1997). Tosakul (2010) points to the prevailing Thai concept of *bun khun* which she defines as an "expression of gratitude and reciprocity to parents, teachers or anybody who does good things to us. To reciprocate bun khun to others is also considered a way to improve our stores of merit in popular Buddhism" (p. 191). Generally, Thai families place greater expectations on daughters than on sons in terms of care and economic support for their parents or siblings which, in turn, view income–related migration out of the village as their duty. Wilson (2004) refers to a "traditional economy of intimacy" where social relations involve patterns of exchange obligations (p. 92).

Many *mia farang* from Thailand's villages have gained material wealth by acquiring houses, land, cars, jewelry or new mobile phones and adopted new roles as family provider or entrepreneur through transnational marriage (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2012). These seemingly successful marriage migrants represent a golden West and thereby encourage other village women to follow their marriage and migration path (Lapanun, 2012). Following Appadurai (1996), such role models, successful narratives and images that also often come through mass media, form a 'global imagination' in which possibilities for a better life are imagined on a global scale and thus stimulate international migration movements. Hence, as Mills (1997) illustrates, there are at least two forces that shape migration decisions in the Thai context: One is the good and dutiful daughter propelled by traditional family values (*bun khun*) and the other is the desire to be a 'modern' (*than samay*) woman who wants to experience a new and different lifestyle.

As local arenas of social and cultural reproduction increasingly intersect with global processes of capitalist expansion and commodification, the 'needs, values, and worries' of Thai women revolve not only around familiar meaning of family and community but also newly imagined (and imaginable) needs and possibilities (Mills, 1997, p.39).

Understanding the experiences and upward or downward mobility of marriage migrants requires one to think beyond statistically–measurable socioeconomic indicators such as income, education, or occupation. According to Mai and King (2009), love, sex, and emotions are under–researched dimensions informing people's experiences of migration. One of the earlier concepts that integrated emotional aspects to the understanding of the well–being of human–beings is Maslow's needs theory (Maslow, 1970). Mai and King (2009) argue that it is not possible to separate

a migrant's desire to improve the economic status and well–being of oneself and the one of their own family from the feelings of love, loyalty, and respect this elicits. They call to bring in emotions, feelings, love and sex into the center of the discussion of migration decision making and experiences. "Love is so often a key factor in the desire and the decision to move to a place where one's feelings, ambitions and expectations–emotional, sexual, political, economic, hedonistic etc.–can be lived more fully and freely" (p. 296). Ethnographic research found that many Thai women having transnational marriages enjoy new ideas and practices related to marriage and sexuality (Tosakul, 2010; Zimmerman, 2014). Even though–as Mai and King (2009) argue–some of these relationships change, become bitter, take an exploitative turn or eventually break up, this will "not diminish the original feeling in the imagination, motivation and realization of migration" (Mai & King, 2009, p. 296).

Cross–Border Marriage and the Communities Abroad

Even though cross–cultural relations between Thais and Westerners date back to the late Ayutthaya and early Rattankosin period in the 18th century, the first main push factors for such transnational intimate relationships and marriages took place in the second half of the 20th century in the context of the Vietnamese–American War (Cohen, 2003; Meyer, 1988). At that time, American soldiers were stationed in Bangkok and other provinces, and tens of thousands of GIs based in Vietnam went to Thailand on their "Rest and Recreation" (R&R) leave. Most military bases in Thailand as well as their R&R zones were "surrounded by a 'pleasure belt' of restaurants, bars, massage parlours, hotels, nightclubs and brothels" (Meyer, 1988, p. 70). Thai women increasingly entered relationships with American military men while quite a few soldiers "preferred to have their own mistress, 'hired wife' or 'bungalow girl'" (Meyer, 1988, p. 71):

> *The origin in prostitution of most Thai women who married American soldiers created an association between prostitution and marriage to foreigners in Thai collective memory, which continued to mark all Thai–Western marriages with a persistent odium, whatever the background of the foreigner's wife might be. (Cohen, 2003, p. 58)*

Recent studies indicate that this perception has been changing in Thailand as *mia farang* are also associated with economic advantages for themselves and their families (Lapanun, 2012). However, simultaneously, the 'mail–order bride' image remains strong in Europe, and Thai women and their families thus experience common stereotyping and prejudice (Sims, 2012).

Parallel to the growing influx of international tourists[1] and expatriates[2], cross–border marriages and migration, especially to countries in Western Europe, North America, and more affluent destinations in Asia including Japan, Korea, and Singapore have become significant. In many cases, men met their Thai wives while visiting Thailand. Such meetings may happen by chance, are planned by one of the partners or a friend, or are arranged by matching and marriage agencies (Cohen, 2003; Zimmermann, 2014). There is also a relation between sex work and cross–border marriage (Cohen, 2003; Williams, 2010). In the case of Germany, as Mix and Piper (2004) exemplify, many Thai women were once in the one or the other way involved in the 'red light' business in Thailand. The Home Office in the United Kingdom stated that Thai women are frequently trafficked into the UK for sex work (Sims, 2008). More recently, however, Thai females who have already settled as wives in their migrant destination country have arranged meetings and even marriages for their friends and relatives in Thailand in order to join them (Sunanta, 2014).

Thai women who migrated through marriage or other intimate relationships to foreigners have become a significant component of the Thai diaspora which is distinctive in many European countries due to a high degree of feminization. In the United Kingdom, 72% of residents (who were born in Thailand) are female (Sims, 2008) and, in Germany, the corresponding figure is 84% female Thai migrants (Ruenkaew, 2003). Also, in Denmark and in the Netherlands, Thai women clearly form the majority of resident Thais, at approximately 80% (Suksomboon, 2009). In Sweden, Thai women have become the most popular choice of foreign partners for Swedish–born men (Haandrikman, 2014). These numbers demonstrate "Thailand's role in the global intimate" (Sunanta, 2014, p. 11) and are also clearly visible in Austria–which serves as a case study for this paper.

Thais in Austria

In Austria, the number of Thai migrants has significantly increased in the last two decades when Thailand became one of Austria's most important long–distance tourism destinations (Butratana & Trupp, 2014). In terms of absolute numbers, Thai nationals in Austria represent a relatively small minority of approximately 4,000 people. However, 60% of the Thai female residents (who comprise 84% of all Thai residents in Austria) are married to Austrian men (Statistics Austria, 2010). This demonstrates the relevance of the Austrian case for the study of cross–border

[1] Even though Thailand experienced a number of considerable political, economic, and ecological crises and disasters, tourism was only impacted on a short–term basis, and experienced increased international tourist arrivals of 5.4 million in 1990, 9.5 million in 2000, 15.9 million in 2005, and almost 30 million in 2015.

[2] There are no reliable numbers of expatriate populations in Thailand, but existing estimations refer to 100,000 Causcasian foreign residents (Howard, 2009, p. 201).

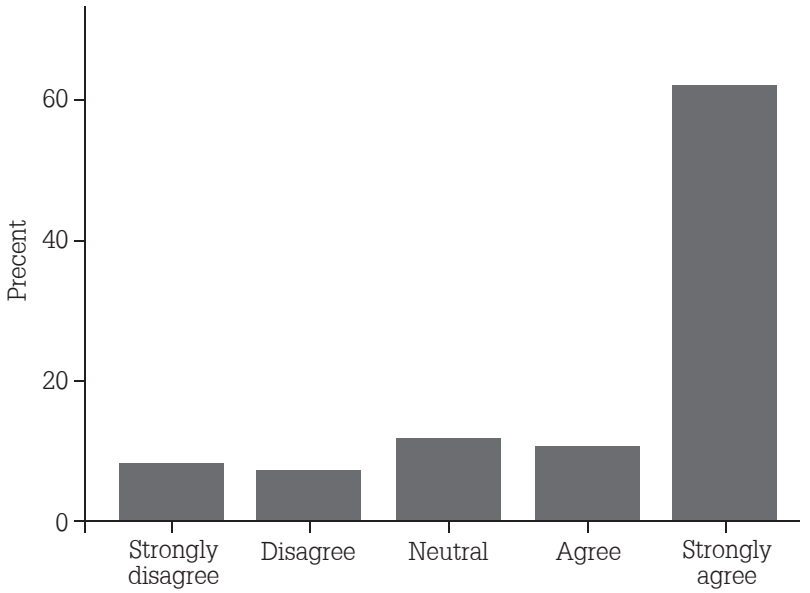
marriages. The demography of Thai migrants in Austria shows that women between 30 and 49 years are predominant. This echoes a cumulative–temporal aspect of migration (Thai females who migrated to Austria ten years ago now represent an older age group) and indicates that many Thai women move to Austria at a middle or older age (Butratana & Trupp, 2014). In Austria more than 60 percent of Thai citizens live in the provinces outside of the capital city of Vienna (Statistics Austria, 2013). As the majority of Thais are marriage migrants, they are more likely to be scattered to wherever their husbands live and are less centered in urban or industrial areas. There is no government–organized labour migration from Thailand to Austria, but various other types of Thai migrants such as independent migrant workers, entrepreneurs (mainly owners/managers of Thai restaurants, massage salons), students, and various kinds of officials (e.g., for the Thai embassy and consulates as well as for UN organizations) exist. According to the Royal Thai Embassy in Vienna, approximately 60–70 Thai students (including visiting students and guest researchers) are enrolled at different university programs in Vienna (Butratana & Trupp, 2011). Thai immigrant businesses–mainly in the form of restaurants, food stores, and massage salons are the most visible manifestation of Thailand in Austria, while Thai temples are mainly located inside apartments and, thus, remain rather invisible to outsiders.

The lines between these different types of migrants have often become blurred as a Thai woman married to an Austrian man may manage a Thai restaurant or enter the country as a student with the main intention to study but eventually falls in love and marries in Austria. Others may enter Austria with an EU Schengen–Visa for tourists which is valid for a maximum of three months. During their stay they may develop or intensify a cross–cultural relationship and return as marriage migrants. Previously, Austrian immigration regulations allowed changing a visa to a residence title for family members. However, laws became stricter in 2006 and 2011, and achieving a secure residence status has become more difficult for so–called "third–country" nationals. Thai marriage migrants seeking Austrian residence need to prove, among other requirements, basic German language skills, sufficient means of subsistence mainly referring to a monthly net income of approximately 1,300 euros (excluding the costs for monthly accommodation rentals) and adequate accommodation (Marriage Without Borders, 2014).

Paradise found?–Preliminary results

In this section we discuss preliminary findings and analyze empirical data on 85 marriage migrants in Austria. We show whether and in which ways marriage migration promotes upward mobility. Generally, more than 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that their marriage with a foreign husband improved their living conditions. However, approximately 15% (strongly) disagreed so (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The marriage with a foreign husband has increased my living condition?



(own survey, n=85)

We will further elaborate on these statements by looking at educational, income–occupational, and social indicators before and after their marriage–related migration to Austria.

In terms of educational background before their migration, the majority of respondents (52.9%) achieved basic education (primary/elementary school), 17.6% completed secondary school and almost 30% have a higher educational certificate in the form of a Bachelor or Masters degree. Fully, 41.2% of the respondents also completed some vocational training, usually with a focus on accounting, beauty & cosmetics, or massage. While the vast majority of respondents (84.7%) could at least speak basic English before their departure to Austria, 92.9% indicated that they had no German skills at this point. In 2011, Austria introduced new immigration regulations for 'third country nationals' (referring to non–EU and non–EWR foreign nationals) which also requires proof of German Language competence at A 1 level[3] before immigrating to Austria. However, the vast majority of our respondents (87.1%) received an Austrian residence title before 2011. Further formal educational achievement after the migration to Austria is mostly in the form of German Language skills and certificate attainment (70.6%). In addition, a number of marriage–related migrants received training in massage (7.1%), cooking (9.4%), and computer skills (3.5%).

[3] according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

It is interesting to note that almost every respondent had employment (fulltime or part–time) prior to her marriage–related migration. The majority (55.3%) referred to themselves as 'employees followed by 'business owners' (18.8%) and 'sex workers' (12.9%). Upon further enquiry, the majority had worked in service–and/or tourism–related occupations such as waitress, receptionists, bar workers, masseuse or hair dresser. It is thus not surprising that the majority of couples who first met in Thailand, got to know each other in a pub, bar, restaurant or another tourist–related place.

Yet, we want to point out that their occupational field is rather diverse as it also involves teachers, accountants, house keepers, and photographers. The second most popular category of prior employment (business owner) refers to micro–entrepreneurs owning and/or managing bars, restaurants, street stalls or other small businesses. Income–wise, more than half of the respondents (55.4%) had an available monthly income of no more than 10,000 baht. With a minimum wage of 300 baht per day in Thailand[4], they can be classified as low–income group today. However, some of the interviewees already emigrated out of Thailand in the 1990s or earlier when different salary scales applied.

Looking at their occupational status after their migration to Austria, a high percentage of marriage–related migrants refer to themselves as employees (44.7%), business owners (23.5%), unemployed (10.6%) and housewives (9.4%). Further examining the group of 'employees', the majority works as housekeepers, (assistant) chefs in restaurants, or at a massues parlors. The two most popular businesses which are run by interviewed Thai women are restaurants (these are mainly/exclusively Thai restaurants) and massage salons. Such businesses also constitute the most visible manifestation of Thai migration in Austria. The Office of Commercial Affairs of the Royal Thai Embassy in Vienna has registered 35 Thai restaurants in Austria, of which 20 are located in Vienna (Butratana & Trupp, 2011).

In terms of individual monthly income, 40.2% of respondents said they earned less than 850 Euro per month which is below Austria's current monthly minimum wage (882.78 EUR). However, 88.2% of the respondents further said they received economic support from their husbands, typically on a regular basis. Almost one–third of the respondents did not know or did not want to tell about their husband's income. Those that did 34.5% reported that their husband earned up to 2,000 EUR per month, 23.8% earned up to 3,000 EUR, and 10.7% earned more than that.

[4] In January 2013 Thailand adopted a new nationwide minimum wage of 300 baht per day. By 2016 however, the 'old' wage regime was reinstated, depending on the on the cost of living and economy of each province.

Generally, the (paid) labor participation of the sample respondents was greater in Thailand than in Austria. Thus, many women who may have been economically self–reliant before their migration have become economically dependent on their husbands after moving to Austria. One–fifth of the women are housewives or unemployed. The major obstacle for finding employment (outside the household) is related to limited German language skill. More than half of the respondents view their lack of German lansuase skill as a problem for living in Austria. While most Thai migrants who have lived in Austria for several years have good German lansuase skills for everyday communication, they face difficulties with official documents.

Moreover, some migrant women said that their husbands opposed them finding a job. Some of the husbands argue that they do not want their wives to work in a massage salon or a Thai bar in Austria, as these places may have a negative impact on the woman. Without a secure income of their own, a divorce or the husband's death can jeopardize the Thai woman's right to Austrian residence. Constable (2005) notes that Asian women's aims to marry men from foreign countries also relates to escaping patriarchal gender relations in their home country, while Western men may turn to Asia to keep or find such relations: "The paradox of such marriages is that, while the men seek what they imagine to be traditional wives, the women often seek and hope for more modern husbands and marriages than are possible in their homeland" (Constable, 2005, p. 8; Freeman, 2005).

The majority of the Thai marriage migrants (77.4%) frequently transfer remittances to their families in Thailand, while half of the respondents agree that their foreign husband has a responsibility for sending money to their families too. The issue of sending money back home is often a critical issue in Thai–Austrian relationships. As foreign husbands in many cases do not understand the social obligations of Thai women, some marriage migrants have to hide their savings from their husband and make money transfers secretly. Following the *bunkun* concept, supporting parents and family members still plays a major role for most of the marriage migrants. However, in communicating with relatives back in Thailand, the Thai women with Austrian husbands prefer to portray their migration as a success and, thus, would be reluctant to describe financial hardship of life in Austria.

While the majority of the Thai marriage migrants achieve material betterment in Austria, a minority experienced economic downward mobility as the case of Fai (not her real name) demonstrates. Fai is 37 years old and comes from the South of Thailand. She met her Austrian husband in 2001 in Thailand and they got married in Austria in 2003. Fai comes from a wealthy family in Thailand where she used to work as manager at her family's tourism resort on Koh Samui Island. Before migrating to Austria she already traveled to many Western countries including Austria, England, Italy, Australia, and New Zealand. Now she lives in a small city in the Austrian

countryside with her two children and her Austrian husband, who is currently studyins at a university and can only earn part–time income. Therefore, in addition to taking care of her children, Fai produces accessories which she sells at a local market. She cannot send money to her family in Thailand but receives 'reverse remittances' from her Thai parents in order to support her family life in Austria. She declined her parents' offer to return to Thailand where she would experience a much higher degree of wealth and luxury than in Austria. Fai prefers to have a seemingly tougher life in Austria where she values her responsibilities for herself and her children whom she wants to raise in a Western lifestyle. She totally disagreed with the princess–like image of marriage migrants in Austria but also stated that she never regretted her marriage and move to Austria.

Concluding remarks

While many of the respondents in this study made statements like "marrying a farang man is not the bridge to heaven" (field notes October 2014) and that "life abroad is often difficult and challenging", the majority of respondents agreed that their marriage–related migration has improved their life–even under the conditions of new economic dependency. Marriage migrants achieve economic advancement which allows them to support their life and their Thai relatives back home, but these material betterments often rely on their husband's support. Having their own good, regular income would help marriage migrants to be more independent from their husbands, but language barriers and levelling pressures from their husbands block occupational upward mobility or any work outside the home. The introduced data and examples thus also deconstruct the simplistic notion of hypergamy that migrant's economic and social advancement could easily be reached via a South–North marriage and migration. The presented data show that it is difficult to achieve occupational upward mobility and that marriage migrants may move downward economically when they decide to live in Austria as the dependent of an Austrian husband.

Limitations of this conference paper–especially in the context of the rather descriptive empirical data presentation–suggest some directions for future investigation. Further research and analysis may reveal whether Thai women from different socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. greater or lesser educational attainment or occupation before their migration) experience differential downward or upward occupational mobility when in Austria. Such an examination may demonstrate a stronger and more nuanced picture of women's experiences of paradoxical mobility. In addition, results can be further elaborated via qualitative data derived from in–depth interviews and participant observation that would potentially offer a deeper analysis of migrant's social status and emotional state in marriage migrant destination areas.

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