

Lifestyle migration in East Asia

Lifestyle migration involves relatively affluent people moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places that they believe will offer them a better quality of life. There is usually an economic incentive to their mobility, but the search for the good life is paramount in their motivations. Lifestyle migration is an increasingly widespread phenomenon, with effects for migrants, locals, cultural life, and economic life. It has been studied quite widely in European and American contexts, but has been overlooked in an Asian setting. Our research project was thus designed to address these gaps in knowledge and to capture the incentives, experiences and outcomes of lifestyle migration in Thailand, Malaysia and China.¹

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RESEARCHERS SPENT A FEW WEEKS during 2012 with British lifestyle migrants in their homes and communities in Hua Hin, Thailand and Penang, Malaysia. Each location has experienced various forms of lifestyle migration, including retirees and second-home owners, self-employed, business expatriates, and those who married into local families. We carried out a total of 65 interviews using face-to-face, email, Skype and telephone interviewing. In addition, an online survey was completed by 112 people responding to questions about motivations and experiences of lifestyle migration in Thailand and Malaysia. We monitored a number of online expatriate discussion forums and analysed the content of several expatriate magazines, the membership and activities of many different organisations (e.g., St Patrick's Society of Selangor; International Women's Association, Penang), and the content of migrants' weblogs about life in East Asia. Lastly, we asked respondents to send us their own photos of life in Malaysia and Thailand.

In addition to studying British lifestyle migrants in Malaysia and Thailand, we collected stories from 31 Hong Kong lifestyle migrants in mainland China (including some families of married couples, fathers and sons). Some of our ethnographic fieldwork involved shadowing the lifestyle migrants and their friends in their cross-border activities and visiting a large-scale residential property aimed at Hong Kong second-home owners and the fast-growing middleclass in post-reform China.

Attracting 'affluent' migrants

Both Thailand and Malaysia have been finding ways to attract relatively wealthy, especially retired, migrants to their countries as a way to create some stability in their economies.² Thailand is promoted as a good destination for international tourists and retirees, with excellent medical care and educational facilities. In particular, Hua Hin is marketed as a desirable location for retirement due to its temperate climate, range of leisure activities (e.g., 12 golf courses), and Western-style shopping and entertainment. Malaysia is promoted to would-be second-home owners and long-term visitors as multicultural, exotic, modern, friendly, and secure. It is also an important destination for medical tourism.

In Thailand, policy incentives to attract foreigners include the 'Non-immigrant O-A Long-stay Visa for a Retired Person', introduced in 1998 for foreigners over 50 years old who have a minimum of 800,000 THB to bring into Thailand. Estimates from 2009 show that 28,509 people are registered as retired (just under 1% of total in-migration to Thailand and almost 8% of the non-working foreign population). Similarly, Malaysia proudly offers the 'Malaysia my Second Home Visa' (MM2H), a renewable multiple entry social visit pass, initially granted as a 10-year permit. It is intended to draw retiree second-home owners, but is designed to also attract younger people of independent means. The current version of the programme has been running since 2002, and the top participating countries are (in order): China, Japan, Bangladesh, UK, Iran, Singapore, Taiwan, Pakistan, Korea, and India. Since 2002, over 22,000 people have registered in the programme. The visa comes with a variety of celebrated incentives: foreigners can buy property, can bring dependents and a car into the country, and incoming pensions are not taxed. The revenue the MM2H visa brings is thought to benefit the tourism, real estate and education sectors regularly and can be exceedingly complex, leading us to conclude that these states manage their in-migration to ensure they get the migrants they want and exclude those they don't, even in the case of these supposedly affluent 'expatriates'.

Defining migrants: lifestyle migration and expatriates

All sorts of labels are used for migrants: immigrants, emigrants, refugees, labour migrants, expatriates, and residential tourists, to name just a few. Western migrants (and other relatively affluent migrants) have tended to be distinguished from other types of migrant by labelling them 'expatriates'. We find this a problematic term because it allocates them an elite

and privileged status that in fact they may not all possess. The term expatriate is more relevant for someone who has moved temporarily in the context of his or her work, perhaps with the buffer of an expatriate package (often including such incentives as high wages, school fees, health insurance, and a housing allowance). In this project we prefer to use the term 'lifestyle migration' because this term embraces retirees, early-retired, self-employed people, those who are in paid employment (for local or transnational companies), and those who are not working. Respondents to our survey were very diverse. Many were retired, but some worked. Others were looking after the home and family, working occasionally on a freelance basis, or running their own business.

Our respondents in Hong Kong also came from diverse backgrounds. They took advantage of the growth in cross-border movement and second-home ownership in China as a result of property rights and land reforms since the 1990s. By 2005, an estimated 190,000 households (approximately 8.3% of the total number of households in Hong Kong) had a second home in the mainland for different reasons.³ While our middleclass lifestyle migrants have the resources to choose when and where to move (e.g., some of them have lived in UK, Australia or other parts of Asia), our working-class respondents have significantly fewer opportunities to travel abroad and were generally confined to their local neighbourhoods in their everyday routine. Crossing the border to the mainland becomes a significant act in itself, or an adventure in an otherwise monotonous daily life.

Those we interviewed in Thailand and Malaysia preferred the term 'lifestyle migrant' because they believed 'expatriate' has negative connotations: western, white, privileged individuals whose motivation is to make money, and who lack any interest in the local society. They felt that, for them, migration was as much about new experiences, getting to know the new society and perhaps making a new home. Indeed, many of our respondents were actively involved in the local communities through being members of committees, engaging in voluntary activities, making local friends and building long-term relationships (including marriage). Migrants also pointed out that in many cases expatriate packages are not as generous as they used to be, so that is no longer the driving force behind the move. Those who had migrated with their jobs often did not feel especially wealthy or privileged.

Social exclusion

For lifestyle migrants, the complicated and regularly changing rules and policies in countries of destination can make their lives precarious. For example, many of our respondents regularly cross briefly into another country to have their visa renewed. In Malaysia, because the closest and easiest place to go for this can be Thailand, it is known colloquially as The Thai

Run. Because of the complexity of the rules, migrants may well not have access to proper health insurance, relying instead on travel insurance that is renewed through various complicated mechanisms, or choose to have no health insurance at all. One migration agent we spoke to told us he even advises his clients to not bother with health insurance, as the prices for local treatment and medicine are so cheap, migrants can afford to 'pay as you go'.

Similarly, insurance companies tend to not provide cover for the very old and the very needy. Some people we spoke to had difficulty qualifying for insurance due to their age or level of health. One 59-year old respondent's physical health upon arriving in Thailand has meant he is ineligible for health insurance, which leaves him and his wife waiting for medical cover and susceptible to large bills in the meantime. He told us, "The worst thing about it is medical costs. I've had problems with my throat, which cost me a fair bit of money. I'm still too heavy to get insured. Because of the operation I had I've lost about 10 stone, I'm still going down and I've got about 8 or 9 kilos to lose and then I get insured, until then I've got to pay for medical expenses and I can't insure my wife until I'm insured. They don't insure Thais. She can claim back on my insurance once I get it."

Social exclusion is 'the dynamic process of being shut out... from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society'.⁴ It 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. Using this definition, there is a danger that some lifestyle migrants in East Asia suffer (or could suffer) from social exclusion. Some are living on 90-day visas with the insecurity of not knowing when they will be prevented from continually renewing their visas. Others are living with no (or with inadequate) health insurance, with all the risks that entails. Of course, if people are not helped to live safely and grow older comfortably, they may eventually return to the UK when their needs become too great to cope with. Similarly, many Hong Kong retired or elderly lifestyle migrants who relocated to take advantage of the low costs of living in the mainland a decade ago, now find they have to reconsider their options in the face of rising living costs and a growing lack of trust in China's medical health system.

Overall, we argue that lifestyle migration is a way to think about different forms of migration driven by the search for a better quality of life, by people who are not compelled to move because of difficult economic or security situations in their home country. Their stories also raise important questions about the ways in which lifestyle migration is being governed as states focus on attracting the 'right' migrants rather than serving their needs or protecting their rights.

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References

- 1 The Lifestyle Migration in East Asia Project (2012-2014) (with Rob Stones, University of Western Sydney, Australia) is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref. ES/I023003/1) and the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong (Ref. RES-000-22-4357). We are grateful to Kate Botterill and Leona Li for their contributions to the research fieldwork.
- 2 Toyota, M. & Xiang, B. 2012. "The emerging transnational retirement industry in Southeast Asia", *IJSSP* 32(11/12): pp.708-719
- 3 Hui, E. & Yu, K.H. 2009. "Second homes in the Chinese Mainland under the "one country, two systems": A cross-border perspective", *Habitat International* 33: pp.106-113
- 4 Walker, A. & C. Walker (eds.) 1997. *Britain Divided: The Growth of Social Exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s*, London: Child Poverty Action Group.

Below:
History and diversity
in Penang. (photo
by Karen O'Reilly)

