Identity Negotiation of Thai Female Migrants in Hong Kong: Under the Gaze of Buddhism

Herbary Zhang
Education University of Hong Kong

Abstract—This article, which aimed to investigate the complicated identity negotiation of Thai female migrants in Hong Kong, guided by identity, gender, and narrative perspectives, examines the subjective experiences of Thai female migrants from an intersectionality perspective. Based on my ethnographic study of Thai migrants in Hong Kong, the analysis shows that Buddhism has become a symbol of the Thai people to articulate their identity and Thainess, becoming the connection between Thai migrants and Thailand. However, their experiences in terms of the autonomy and freedom for women in Hong Kong society empower them to challenge and question gender inequality and the definition of being a woman. Under these circumstances, subtle idea changes set the way for the negotiation of gender role expectations and reinvent their womanhood in Hong Kong. This study enriches understanding of the dynamic nature of identity negotiation and in-between identity.

Introduction

My original interest in this area of research was sparked by my contacts with Thai female migrants in Hong Kong. I was known to Warunee through Wat Buddhadhamaram, one of four Thai Buddhist temples under royal patronage in Hong Kong. Her words were so revealing of the marginal position of a Thai female migrant

> I do not know where to belong. Sometimes I do not know if I am a Hong Konger or a Thai… In Thailand, people envy me as Hong Kong wife, but here people just think I am a domestic worker like other Southeast Asians … I feel that I have no position in society … I just can't find meaning living here. I would rather go back to Thailand … Only when I come to Wat Buddhadhamaram, the people, the food, the language make me feel like I am back home and miss Thailand less. (Warunee, 65, self-employed)

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Warunee's idea of positioning reflects the concept of identity, which refers to the individual's position and relationship to particular social category systems (Frable, 1997). In Hong Kong, where anti-immigrant sentiment is strong, female migrants are always classified as outsiders and find themselves in vulnerable positions. There was an estimated average of around 8,879 Thai female migrants living in Hong Kong as of 2016. How they position themselves in society and how they find meaning in their lives would have great impact on personal, familial and societal levels. This issue motivated me to embark on this project to explore the subjective experiences of female migrants from Thailand.

Although there are a few studies related to Thai migrants, most of the research was conducted in Western countries. However, little attention has paid to Hong Kong, which is deemed to be culturally and socially significant and different from the West as a city where East meets West. However, no significant literature existed investigating the specific socio-demographic group of Thai female migrants, rather studies existed on domestic workers from Southeast Asia. Statistically, by 2016, a total of 584,383 ethnic minorities, constituting 8 percent of the entire population, were living in Hong Kong. Analysed by Asian ethnic group (other than of Chinese race), the majority were Filipinos (2.5 percent) and Indonesians (2.1 percent). For Thai migrants, the number totalled 10,215, constituting 1.4 percent of the population in Hong Kong, but the migration pattern of the Thai people moving to Hong Kong is highly feminised.

Recently, there have been a number of studies regarding common stereotypes of Thai women in Hong Kong society, as associated with the sex trade, prostitution and mail-order brides, or the negative images of them as domestic workers. These images of Thai women are often represented in Hong Kong media, such as in newspapers, documentaries (about Thai massage parlours which offer sex services), TV shows, and so on. According to these representations, and general perceptions of Thai women in Hong Kong, it is, therefore, imperative to examine how Thai female migrants in Hong Kong perceive themselves in Hong Kong society despite all the challenges and stereotypes they face as Southeast Asian women. It is also worthwhile finding out what kind of strategies Thai female migrants adopt to counter, or deal with, these challenges. Another main point of my research has been to observe the participation of Thai female migrants in transnational migration practices and networks; how do they perceive their identity through a Buddhist perspective in Hong Kong? And how does the Hong Kong context shape their identity negotiation and reconstruct their womanhood.

Transnationalism and transnational migration

Basch et al. (1994: 7) proposed the idea of "transnationalism" to describe "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement." In their view, the analysis of migrants as those who move from one country to another without maintaining a relationship to their origin is no longer adequate to describe today's migration (Ibid,:. 4). Accordingly, they introduced the term "transnational migrant" as a concept to explain a new type of migrant, who constructs social fields that connect their home countries and

host countries together (Schiller et al. 1992). Basch et al. (1994) define the social field as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organised, and transformed.

Schiller (1992: 1-2) described transnational migrants as those who "take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously". This notion of transnational migrant is significant for the fact that in today's globalised world, migration cannot only be analysed in terms of permanent rupture or abandonment of "roots" of migrants because migrants nowadays maintain their ties, create networks and take part in activities of their country of origin and country of settlement at the same time. Therefore, it is important to understand transnational migrants as "people who are in transit, whose identities are unfixed, destabilized and in the process of changing" (McDowell, 2005 cited in Huang et al. 2000).

The concept of transnational migration should be discussed along with the notion of belonging because as Yuval-Davis (2006) states: "belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling at home." The idea of transnational migration observes people's multiple relationships with two or more nation states, as well as how interconnection of different societies serves to shape and transform identities of transnational migration. However, it gives little focus on the narratives, in which transnational migration describes itself or judges the migrants' own and others' belonging. One of the interesting points in the discussion of belonging is that transnational migrants do not necessary have a feeling of "belonging" in the community in which these migrants are identified. Alternatively speaking, one might feel accepted and "belong" without fully identifying in, or giving full allegiance to, the community they live in (Anthias, 2006). Yuval-Davis (2006a: 202) asserts that "identities are narratives, stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)". She suggests that the creation of belonging is not only about how people perceive themselves and their collectivities, but also their reflection of "emotional investments" and their "desire for attachment." Furthermore, it is suggested that people's experiences of exclusion, rather than inclusion, partly shape the feelings people have about their social locations. Furthermore, regarding narratives of identity as a "process", thus it is important to note that narratives of identity can transform, be challenged and multiply; as Yuval-Davis (2006: 202) puts it: "individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than positing of identity as a stable state".

Arguing that belonging is a gendered process, Anthias (2006) explains that gender is an essential marker of boundaries. She also asserts that women are often burdened with the responsibility of reproducing national discourses, imaginary, and practices. Women have a crucial role in the ideological and cultural reproduction of the nation. Moreover, women not only give birth to national subjects in a biological sense, they yield nationalised subjects through the transmission of national and cultural values and practices; women are often referred to as the symbol of the nation. Sutton (1992) proposed that the rethinking of migration from a gendered perspective must go beyond consideration of how the experiences of migrants differ for women and men. She suggested that we also need to know more about how the roles of women and men in the

global economy differ in both the sending and receiving countries; what their gender-specific roles are in sustaining and transmitting cultural traditions; and to explore more fully the work and caretaking experiences of immigrant women.

Transnationalism and identity

As mentioned above, Thai female migrants' identity and belongings must be understood under the scenario of transnational migration; although they have moved to and settled in Hong Kong, they still preserve various types of connections to Thailand, which is their homeland. The narratives of the migration stories of Thai female migrants allow us to analyse their subjective experiences and perceptions. It can be seen that the lived experiences of Thai female migrants in Hong Kong were embedded in an array of paradoxes along with their transnational migration experiences across the border.

Buddhism and transnational nationalism

"As we are Thai, we should be very proud of being Buddhist. Buddhism makes us more united. Buddhism makes us more loyal to our king ... I am glad to see many young people preserve our Thai culture! We adults must teach them how to be a Thai because they don't care much, but we know how important it is and it is our job to teach them," stated the Thai host, cheerfully introducing the Thai music and Buddhism culture exhibition during the "Visakha Bucha", Buddhist Day, celebrated at Wat Buddhadhamaram in Yuen Long. Wat Buddhadhamaram, built in 2006, was initiated by a Thai woman, who had married a wealthy Hong Kong husband and donated money and the land in Yuen Long. The temple has an abbot, or "Luang Por", which means "venerable father" and is used as a title of respect for the senior Buddhist monk in charge of general affairs of the temple. The "Luang Por" was sent to Hong Kong by the National Office of Buddhism in Thailand through the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Hong Kong, alongside the Thai Sangha, which promotes Thailand's overseas Buddhist policy and activities.

According to Bao (2008), the main purpose of expanding Thai Buddhism abroad is to serve overseas Thai communities and other Theravada Buddhist followers outside Thailand. Building the distinctive Buddhist temple overseas and promoting Buddhist culture is the mission of National Office of Buddhism in Thailand. It involves not only transnational migration, but also Buddhist monks within and outside Thailand, as well as local people of different cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, as Massey (1992: 80) suggests, We must "conceptualize space as constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global." In the movement of de-territorialized and re-territorialized Buddhism, Buddhist spatial practices challenge prevailing notions of "Thai Buddhism", which often associates Thai nation-state building converts with meditation and immigrant Buddhists with rituals, ceremonies, and merit-making.

As illustrated above, Thai Buddhism has a close relationship with Thai nation-state building and the impact on the identity of Thai migrants. Understanding how Thailand's

process of nation building was carried out, and how Thai Buddhism was involved in the building of the Thai nation state, will enable us to understand the influence of nation-state building and identity.

Numerous relevant academic studies explore how Thai national identity, or the "Thai Nation", was created and have examined the ways this concept affects Thai people and Thai society. Sattayanurak (2005) also points out: "The Thai nation" or national identity through the definition of "Thainess" or "being Thai", which clarifies what the characteristics each Thai citizen should have. She explained that the concept of "Thainess" in the present day was strongly dominated by a number of government-supported intellectuals. The dominant thought was led by (M.R.) Kukrit Pramoj. "Thainess", for which Kukrit gave the definition, displays characteristics, thoughts and the ways that real Thais (citizen) should behave, and can be concluded as follows:

> 1. "Nation": The "Thai nation" is superior to other nations because it has many valuable components of "Thainess," including Thai king, Thai-style governance, Thai language, Thai arts, such as literature and drama, as well as Thai decorum and Thai traditions. These elements of "Thainess" helped support the hierarchical social structure that formed the basis of a dictatorial political system. Therefore, the Thai people should be proud of the Thai nation.
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> 2. "Religion": Buddhism is one important component of "Thainess" by making people aware that the worldly part of Buddhism was the source of various aspects of "Thainess," such as Thai art, Thai decorum, Thai characters, as well as Thai-style governance that is full of kindness, because Thai-style rulers firmly uphold Buddhist ethics, which made them righteous and used their power justly, so that check-and-balance mechanisms became unnecessary. In addition, Buddhism was the wellspring of Thai moral standards, which made Thai society organised and peaceful without hindering its economic development. In addition, Buddhism made Thai society a "society of kindness" whose members are full of compassion and do not harshly exploit each other.
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> 3. "King": The Thai king is sacred in the Thai royal institution, a magnanimous and generous and righteous ruler not only helping to develop the country to be prosperous and peaceful, lifting people from poverty, but also helping to sustain precious "Thainess". Under the unifying spiritual centres of kingship and Buddhism, society is characterised by kindness, generosity, hospitality, and harmony. Therefore, Thai people, who are genuine Thais, are loyal to the king, and must sacrifice even their lives to preserve "kingship" and "Buddhism," so that "Thailand is good" remains true forever.

Obviously, Buddhism is one of the essential components of "Thainess". Being Thai means having such and such a feeling and a Thai character. Buddhism has become a symbol of the Thai people to articulate their identity and became the connection between Thai migrants and Thailand. Even Thai people would think that being a Thai and a Buddhist is equal, so this "Thainess" has a core that is no less universal than European civilisations, because it is built on Buddhism which was "superior".

Visakha Bucha is a Buddhist Day which is celebrated on the full moon of the month of Visakha, usually in April (first), May or June (last) each year. Wat Buddhadhamaram held the celebration of Visakha Bucha on 21 May 2016. Wat Buddhadhamaram usually celebrates all the major Buddhist days, such as Makha Bucha, Songkran and other important religious and royal holidays at the weekend, so people can join these events without taking leave from work. The management committee of Wat Buddhadhamaram is thus sufficiently flexible about the dates of the celebrations for just this reason. Visakha Bucha be considered as one of the most important Buddhist holidays in Thailand. People will need to visit the temple to offer food to monks, make merit and pray for good things for the coming year.

About 200-300 people visited the temple on Visakha Bucha. Most of them were Thai women living in Hong Kong. Some also brought their Hong Kong husbands, their children and in-laws with them. Some of the in-laws also joined the religious ceremony in the morning and even prayed in Thai along with the monks together with the Thai women. Some Thai women deliberately wore traditional Thai dress to participate in the festival. Wat Buddhadhamaram had several different activities for Visakha Bucha: all the food was free, but there were donation boxes next to the food stalls. It is wholly voluntary to give the money to support the temple and promote Thai culture in Hong Kong. Food is extremely important in Thai life, so there was a number of traditional and regional dishes made by Thais in Hong Kong. Attendees seemed very pleased to be able to enjoy the familiar flavours of home. Although it is not difficult to find mainstream Thai food in Hong Kong at an affordable price, there is considerable regional variation. Many people said that they wished to eat different regional dishes at the festival and buy some Thai products. Officers from Royal Thai Consulate General also attended the festival in an official capacity, making a short speech and donating money to express the support of the Thai government.

The importance of delineating the presence of Wat Buddhadhamaram and its activities is to examine its implication as a transnational social field regarding lives of Thai female migrants. The temple is an evident sphere where transnational practices occur in a concrete sense. In her studies of religious transnationalism of Salvadoran migrants in the United States, Cecilia Menjívar (1999: 589) states that: "for migrants, religious participation offers not just a way to express and interpret their individual interests and to remain connected to their origin communities; it also provides a link to churches and religious organizations that maintain an active collective engagement by creating and shaping transnational spaces."

In Thailand, the relationship between Thai Buddhists and the temple prevails at every step during their lives. As reported by Thailand's National Office of Buddhism in 2015, there were only four Thai Buddhist temples located in Hong Kong, but about 40,000 Thai Buddhist temples in Thailand. Except for being the venue for religious practice, the temple also plays crucially diverse roles in the Thai community, such as an educational function wherein schools are set up in the temple's domain. In rural areas, government officials sometimes use the temple's space as a meeting hall for district functionaries, village headmen and villagers. Furthermore, the temple is regarded as the sociocultural centre, as it provides space for recreational activities, where parents may

bring their children to play in the temple yard. Its space is commonly used during major events, such as the New Year celebration where shows, dance, and other recreational activities take place (Virasai 1981).

As noted above, Buddhism is inextricably linked to Thai nation-building project. Buddhism is one of the core symbols of the Thai nation. The legacy of the "nation-religion-monarchy" trinity still prevails in Thai society today as it is reinforced both at the institutional and individual level. It is required constitutionally that the Thai king has to be Buddhist. In addition, discourse of "being Thai" equating to "being Buddhist" is still prevalent in Thai society (Bao 2015). Therefore, participation in religious practices or the temple activities of Thais settled abroad should not be merely seen as a matter of faith, but also a sentiment of nationalism attached to them. Benedict Anderson (1983) asserts that, even though members of a nation do not possess face-to-face interactions, they are bounded together by an imaginary mutual connection. This imagination is forged by the creation of language and symbols, such as censuses, maps and museums. In the Thai case, the creation of the national flag and the meanings of the national symbols attached to it are the best example. Given the discourse of the "trinity", Thai Buddhism must be understood as closely related to the Thai nation-building project.

Transnational space and belonging

During interviews, Wat Buddhadhamaram was often mentioned by Thai female migrants as a connection to "*baan*" (meaning either country or house, i.e. "home"). Apparently, the temple, as a re-territorialised national and cultural space, provoked migrants' sense of belonging and emotional attachment to their home country. For instance, Noo told me when I asked about her religious belief and opinion in terms of monarchy:

> Although I live in Hong Kong, as a Thai, we should still believe in Buddhism, respect the king, because the king is the spiritual sustenance of the Thai people; although Hong Kong society is more democratic, I think as a Thai, this is the way to express our loyalty. Buddhism makes Thai people more united and caring about each other. I always go to the Thai temple here. It's fun to help the temple's activities and to meet a lot of Thai people. It's warm and it makes me feel like I am back in Thailand. Maybe because it fulfils those feelings, I don't miss Thailand much. When people cook Thai food, it's really Thai food. So it feels like the yearning for food decreases. (Noo, 62, self-employed)

Based on the statements from Noo, we can find that the Thai temple is where cultural and national boundaries are reinforced. Especially at the Thai temple outside Thailand, Thai migrants can find everything that makes them feel close to Thailand, such as Thai food, Thai culture, Thai friends and Thai language. The Thai temple not only became a home away from home for Thai female migrants in Hong Kong to heal their homesickness, but has also become a place for their spiritual presence to empower them in the host country.

Another interesting finding, which emerged during my interviews, was that some

of the Thai female migrants told me that they were much more interested in religion after moving to Hong Kong. When I asked Mukdawan about her religious beliefs and whether she thinks religion is a key element in keeping traditional culture and values, she replied:

> I am a Buddhist; I feel it is good to be a Buddhist. I feel great and respected when I go to the temple to attend their activities and to meet other Thai people who live here in Hong Kong ... I think the Thai Buddhist temple is a small Thai community for us to get everything, not only for material stuff, but also it makes you feel warm and miss Thailand; you don't know how important the Thai temple is to you until you have left Thailand and live in a foreign country. (Mukdawan, 50, self-employed)

Malee also explained why Buddhism is important for her and why she feels a greater interest in Buddhism after she left Thailand and moved to Hong Kong:

> Buddhism means a lot to me. Every time I face problems, I go to meet the Buddha and pray: the Buddha will help me to solve these problems. Especially after I moved to Hong Kong, I have to face many problems … the temple is the only place for me to relax during this hard time for work and life in Hong Kong. The monk taught me how to face karma. I saw the results, so I became more religious. It turns out that I go to the temple more often than when I was in Thailand. (Malee, 65, self-employed)

In terms of its sociocultural functions, the Thai temple invokes feelings of yearning for one's culture and sense of collectivity. A Thai temple also functions as a cultural institution to socialise the children of Thai female migrants into Thai culture and its identity. Yuval-Davis (2003) asserts that: "religion construct of the "Other" – the stranger, the enemy, are crucial in that respect." In the same way, Jirattikorn (2016) suggests that the Thai Buddhist temple serves to maintain a physical and spatial boundary where Thai people define their identity against the non-Buddhist. Therefore, Thai female migrants becoming more interested in religion and more religious can be related to ideological constructions of individual identity: the ideological construction of differences between cultures. This frequently invites stereotypes about "us" and "them" and evaluations that present certain cultures as superior.

In Thai society, the temple is of the utmost importance, as it is deemed as "necessary for a civilized social existence" (Potter 1976). Wat Buddhadhamaram also can be seen as a "spiritual sustenance shelter" for Thai female migrants. The temple provides a space for public worship, religious ceremony, a community meeting place, solving personal crises and celebrating festivities. Buddhist activities are essential practices for the maintenance of the spiritual identities and roles—"spiritual self"—of these Thai female migrants. For Thai female migrants, visiting the Thai temple is a means of coping with difficulties when they are living in Hong Kong. In addition, the persistence of the Thai Buddhist institution in Hong Kong

must be credited to the daily contributions and involvement of these Thai migrant women, as Thai male workers rarely visit these Buddhist temples while working in Hong Kong.

As Noo emphasised:

> I think this (Buddhism) is not just my hobby, but also my spiritual sustenance. I can meet many different friends there. Some of them come from Thailand to Hong Kong like me. Some of them are local people who are interested in Thai culture. Some of them come from Southeast Asia and share the same religious culture with Thailand. I met many friends there and have broadened my social network; it is a way to make me happy and make more close friends here. (Noo, 62, self-employed)

Wasu also mentioned the temple as a "spiritual sustenance shelter" for Thai female migrants, especially when they have psychological and emotional problems in Hong Kong:

> Buddhism is important to me because I don't always find happiness here. Sometimes I can find a way out, but sometimes cannot. Who should I talk to, who can I talk to? I can talk to my husband, my parents-in-law, but not always ... I can't make them understand everything about me. But, the temple, the monk, the people there give you an answer. So I like going to the temple, participating in activities and meeting friends who talk about, and are interested in, the same things, and the monks are really generous there. They give me advice and point me in the right direction, so I can find the meaning of life when I got lost. (Wasu, 38, banker)

Antonsich (2010) states that belonging should be analysed both as a personal, intimate feeling of being "at home" in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging). While Yuval-Davis (2011: 4) argues: "It is important to differentiate between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home' ... The politics of belonging comprise of specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivities." Belonging can involve the shared values, networks and resources with others, but need not do so. Its technology is multiple and its operations wide-ranging. We can ask about the politics of shared values, networks, practices, resources. In these formulations, the experience of resistance of Thai female migrants negotiates, or shapes, their sense of belonging to their home country. Some of the Thai female migrants said that they cannot fully assimilate with local people and local society, or felt trapped in-between. Under these circumstances, Thai female migrants found the temple to be a "spiritual sustenance shelter", or a place where answers are provided for self-empowerment when they faced frustration and problems.

Rethinking Buddhism and gender equality

Thailand has a close relationship to Buddhism since 94 percent of its population

are Buddhists, which is the highest percentage of Buddhists of any country in the world. Since 1200 CE, Buddhism has played a major role in Thailand politically, socially and culturally, and its ideology is seamlessly infused into Thai society. Therefore, the context of gender in Buddhism and the way Buddhism teaches gender has important ramifications for the entire society.

Although the concept of gender equality existed and was first mentioned in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, where the Buddha, when pressed for an answer from Ananda, proclaimed that it is possible for women to leave their household life by becoming *bhikkhuni* (a female monk) and for women to achieve different levels of enlightenment. Therefore, he allowed women to become ordained. However, contemporary Thai Buddhism and its currently practices believe that physiological sex does make a difference in terms of enlightenment and reflecting gender inequality. For instance, some senior Thai monks, especially those from an influential temple under royal patronage, teach that being born as a woman is the product of bad karma accumulated in their past lives. Women, therefore, cannot attain enlightenment. The only way she can become enlightened is by first making lots of merit by offering donations to the temple, then praying to be born as a man in the next life, as only men can become enlightened.

Therefore, many people in Thai society are firmly convinced that contemporary Thai Buddhism is a core of gender discrimination, with enlightenment only possible for men as everyone else has bad karma. Women are considered inferior by influential temples and Buddhists, so protocols within popular Buddhist practice derive from this inherent belief. Women are, therefore, procedurally barred from being ordained as monks in Thailand and they are also forbidden in sacred places, such as certain pagodas.

Kirsch (1975: 176) focuses on what he takes to be a striking fact: "Thus the Thai pattern of occupational specialization follows a sexual division of labor, women specializing in "economic-type" activities, men specializing in bureaucratic or "political-type" activities." He adds to this the additional significant fact that only males can become monks, thus assuming the role in which the teachings of the Buddha are both practiced and perpetuated. The distinctive sexual division of labour, that Kirsch believes he has discovered, can be traced, he maintains, to a Theravada Buddhist world view wherein women are deemed to be more firmly rooted in their worldly attachments than are men; men are thought to be more ready to give up such attachments.

Social attitude surveys on the prevailing double standard in sexual relations and gender equality were conducted throughout Thailand by Wasikasin and Haemaprasith (1996) and Wasikasin (2002), with 1,838 and 996 participants respectively. It was noted that gender inequality had been initiated in the family through Buddhism. In Thai society, parents have traditionally treated their girls and boys differently. For example, daughters were educated to serve the husband and look after the parents. In the Buddhist context, Thai children own "*bunkuhn*" (a debt) to their parents for giving birth and raising them and the children should repay their parents as soon as possible (Chamratrithirong et al. 1988). However, due to the religious beliefs that hold that women are born with lower karma and that men can go into the monkhood to make the highest merit, the way of repaying the parents is different for boys and girls (Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1985). While boys were expected to practise as a monk temporarily and earn merit for their parents,

girls were supposed to serve their parents for their entire life. Nowadays, even though girls are offered the opportunity to gain more education, in some, particularly rural, areas, parents still believe that the future for girls is to get married and take care of their households, and therefore education is not necessary (Praparpun 2009).

In addition, traditional Thai Buddhist familial norms encourage women to be selfless, nurturing, devoted to their husbands and prepared to make sacrifices for the well-being of their families (Xu, Kerley, and Sirisunyaluck 2011). According to a classic Thai proverb, which like many other proverbs places men above women, the male of a couple is compared with the front legs of an elephant, while the female is the hind legs (Wasikasin and Hemmaprasit 1998). This is reflected in Thai women still traditionally being responsible for the household and for taking care of all family members, despite the fact that they have also played an economic role for a long time, the same as their partners, and are also expected to support their parents. It could be said that these family roles have contributed significantly to the patriarchal gender attitudes prevalent in Thai society.

However, Charles Keyes (1984) argued that notions of gender are a given for most people, as they are rooted in fundamental assumptions about the underlying meaning of reality. In Buddhist Thailand, gender notions can be shown to derive from sources that formulate a Buddhist worldview. He argues that Thai Buddhist culture does not relegate women to a religiously inferior status relative to men; rather, both males and females, who understand the world in Buddhist terms, face the same problem of attachment to the world, although the characteristic tension between worldly attachment and orientation toward Buddhist salvation is expressed for females in gender images that are different than those for males.

After getting married to a Hong Kong husband and immigrating to Hong Kong, Thai female migrants have to negotiate some of the Buddhist beliefs that they bring with them, while also confronting Hong Kong regulations. In Thailand, the east direction, where the sun rises, is considered a more auspicious direction than the west, where the sun sets. Facing east also is preferred for the purpose of air circulation. The south direction is the least desirable direction because the Thai word for south puns with the word "underneath" or "below." With this kind of belief, the Buddhist temple in Thailand always has the privilege of using reserved land even if sometimes against the urban development plans. However, in Hong Kong, all construction proposals must be approved by the Housing Department, the direction of the buildings being decided by an urban development plan. However, the most significant consequence is that Thai female migrants start rethinking the gender inequalities in Thai Buddhism, and challenge them.

As Jun said, life experiences in Hong Kong as a Thai female migrant make her rethink the context of gender inequality in the Buddhist context and want to discover what she wants to be:

> They (Thai people) are born for the king and can die for the king. But not me, I used to be like this, but not now. Born in Thailand as a Thai, we don't have choice ... But after you go abroad, you have to think what is right and what is wrong. I don't mean Buddhism is bad, at least Buddhism teaches Thai people to be kind and

> honest. What I don't like is the Thai government, Thai institutions, they always use religion as a tool to force us follow their orders … But why Buddhism teaches people that women cannot be a monk, why women should serve men, I think many women in Thailand will never think about it, maybe they dare not do so or they don't want to, but after I moved to Hong Kong, I saw women in Hong Kong are willing to fight for their rights. They have a lot of campaigns to express their dissatisfaction and to ask for freedom. (Jun, 30, clerk)

Pinkaew also shared the difference between gender roles in Theravada Buddhism and the impact on her life:

> Actually, I have more freedom in Hong Kong because in Thailand, we believe in Theravada Buddhism, which somehow brings discrimination to women. Women in Thailand are required to focus on domestic roles after marriage. And in Thailand, women are more likely to be subservient to males, to their children, but in Hong Kong, women are much more equal to men, especially women have more chance to work outside their homes. But this situation might be caused by the social fact that Hong Kong is a more expensive place so that there is greater economic pressure on both husbands and wives. (Pinkaew, 42, academic)

The case of Thai female migrants is interesting since their gender identities are intersected and, most importantly, contested by various political and cultural domains. Transnational migrants retain values and norms from their origin, but have to re-evaluate them as they confront values and norms of the host country. Thai female migrants do not completely abandon their original culture; at the same time, they do not completely adopt the new one.

As discussed, gender roles and identities are fluid, as they are shaped by dynamic and overlapping power structures. Emphasising the problematic assumption of "woman" as a stable universal identity, Butler (1999: 14) further explains that: "as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relation". Furthermore, the examples above show us why we should not understand the category of "woman" as essentialised, universal and unchanging, especially when studying female migrants.

Conclusion

Women have always been key actors in the field of migration. Especially in the globalised world, women move, settle and actively make their living in new countries. Despite their resettlement, female migrants still retain ties with their country of origin. They bring with them national and cultural aspirations, and practices from their homeland. At the same time, female migrants rework and renegotiate their identities as they confront the new norms and values of the receiving country. This process of sustaining multiple connections to the migrants' homeland is referred to as "transnational migration."

This article has argued that the experiences of Thai female migrants in Hong Kong should be examined in relation to the process of transnational migration. Women's transnational and intersectional experiences also relate to the issue of belonging, as mentioned. The experiences of exclusion and the problems in life, to some extent, affected their emotional attachment and feelings of belonging to their home country. Many Thai female migrants retained strong ties to Thailand and enhanced their identity of Thainess through various means on Buddhist perspectives. However, when Thai female migrants arrive in Hong Kong, their experiences due to a new wave of autonomy and the freedom enjoyed by women in Hong Kong society empowered them to challenge and question the gender inequality that exists in Thai Buddhism, even shaking their inherent faith in Buddhism. Under these circumstances, the Buddhist faith becomes a "buffet" for Thai female migrants: they will rationally choose some parts and reject others. These subtle ideological changes set the way for the negotiation of gender role expectations and reconstruct their womanhood as a Thai female migrant in Hong Kong.

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