

From ‘Overseas Student’ to ‘Immigrant’: Thai Skilled Migration to Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a qualitative study of Thai skilled migration to Australia focusing on the transition period during which Thai overseas students become skilled immigrants, as well as the way that they adjust themselves to Australian society. The research employed two major qualitative techniques in the fieldwork: participant observation and in-depth interviewing from 2007 to 2009. Twenty-five Thai skilled immigrants in Melbourne who initially came to Australia for further education and then applied for Australian permanent residency after graduation generated the core data for the study. The paper highlights how a demand for overseas education has traditionally been driven by the value Thais place on being more Western and developing fluency in the English language as well as the expectation that study in Australia will temporarily liberate them from social stresses and raise their economic and social status in the Thai social hierarchy. However, they have migrated to Australia after the completion of their overseas study rather than returning to Thailand. Their migration decision can be seen as a social product, not as the sole result of individual decisions but a matter which involved other family members. Non-economic factors relating to the independence of life were of considerable importance in the migration decision. In negotiating culture shock, the students typically integrated into the Australian-Thai community and made use of these connections to make links to Australia’s broader multicultural society. The benefit for Thai students of grouping with fellow Thais was that this initial network gave them the confidence and comfort to develop an understanding of Australia as a stimulating and desirable place to live. This confidence also created a space for the students to make a decision about permanent migration.

Keywords: immigration, immigrant, overseas student, international student

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีพื้นฐานจากการวิจัยการข้ายถิ่นของนักเรียนไทยในประเทศไทยในประเทศออสเตรเลีย บทความนำเสนอการตัดสินใจเลือกศึกษาต่อในต่างประเทศ การปรับตัวต่อสังคมใหม่ และปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อการตัดสินใจข้ายถิ่นฐานภัยหลังสำเร็จการศึกษาในต่าง

ประเทศ ผู้มีส่วนร่วมในการวิจัยเป็นนักเรียนไทยข้ายถิ่นในครมเมลเบริร์น จำนวน 25 คน เก็บข้อมูลโดยวิธีสัมภาษณ์อย่างมีส่วนร่วมและการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกในช่วงปี ค.ศ.2007–2009 ผลการศึกษาพบว่า การตัดสินใจข้ายถิ่นฐานของนักเรียนไทย มิใช่กระบวนการการตัดสินใจของนักเรียนเองแต่เพียงลำพัง หากแต่เป็นกระบวนการที่ครอบคลุมมีส่วนร่วม

ในการตัดสินใจ และมิใช่กระบวนการการที่มีปัจจัยทางเศรษฐกิจเป็นเหตุสูงใจเท่านั้น หากแต่มีปัจจัยทางสังคมเข้ามาระบบทั้งสองอย่าง ทำให้เกิดการมีชีวิตอิสระ การได้รับพิเศษและจัดการชีวิตของตนเองซึ่งนักเรียนไทยเหล่านี้ค้นพบในช่วงเวลาที่ศึกษาอยู่ในออสเตรเลีย นอกจากนี้ เครือข่ายชุมชนไทยข้ามอันในประเทศไทยอสเตรเลียยังมีส่วนสำคัญที่ทำให้นักเรียนไทยเหล่านี้มีองค์ความเป็นไปได้ที่จะพำนักอาศัยต่างประเทศในประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ: การข้ามอัน ผู้ข้ามอัน นักเรียนนอก นักเรียนต่างชาติ

INTRODUCTION

The flow of international students seeking permanent residency outside their homeland has recently been much-discussed as part of crisis migration around the world. Australia has been regarded as an aggressive exporter of education services. Since the 1980s, the Australian government has developed policies designed to target immigrants with experience in areas where there is a skill shortfall through its general skilled migration program. This program, known as the General Skilled Migration program (GSM), is for professionals and other skilled immigrants who are not sponsored by an employer and who have skills in particular occupations required in Australia (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012). Accordingly, qualified international students are able to apply for and be granted permanent residency following the completion of their studies without the need to leave Australia. The possibility of Australian permanent residency has influenced many international students—not just Thai students—to stay in Australia after graduation. International students have not been content to simply return to their home countries but have become part of a global movement of labor, skills, capital, and knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research engaged primarily with ethnographic perspectives and employed two major qualitative techniques in the fieldwork: participant observation and in-depth interviewing from 2007 to 2009. Twenty-five Thai skilled immigrants of diverse age, gender, place of birth, occupation, and marital status were involved. They initially came to Australia for further education and then applied for Australian permanent residency after graduating. Almost all participants held Bachelor degrees from Thailand before arriving in Australia. The majority had worked in Thailand while the others were newly graduated and unemployed before seeking international education in Australia. All participants had been overseas Thai students for at least two years before migrating to Australia. In addition to the Australian-based research, I also undertook interviews of seven families of key informants in Thailand to investigate the immigration experience across the geographic range of this diasporic sociality.

To approach potential participants, I obtained some assistance from the Thai formal and informal social organizations in the State of Victoria. In order to establish rapport and develop a deeper understanding of my participants' lives, I shared the same house as some participants and worked casually with some participants in a Thai restaurant. I also visited Buddhist temples with some participants, and worked for the Thai community as a volunteer on many occasions, working for the Thai Information and Welfare Association, and especially as a teacher in the Thai Language School of Melbourne. I have attempted to informally interact with many other Thais and their Australian contacts and observe them when visiting Thai families, Thai restaurants, Buddhist temples, Thai DVD shops, Thai educational agencies, the Royal Thai consulates, Thai night clubs, and Thai festivals throughout the year. These contributed to a much greater understanding of migration experiences in

the broader Thai community in Australia. I have tried to immerse myself in the day-to-day lives of my Thai informants as much as possible and also to make the research project as methodologically sound as possible.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Becoming an overseas student

Over the decades, the majority of new arrivals from Thailand to Australia have continued to be students (see Table 1). Recently Thailand has become a main source country for international students in Australia. Accordingly, one of the research questions of this paper is to understand why in the first place many Thai students come to Australia for further education.

The pattern of Thai students studying overseas may be explained by a combination of 'push and pull' factors. 'Push' factors operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study. 'Pull' factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students. Some of these factors are inherent in the source country, some in the host country and others in the students themselves. The argument is that a demand for overseas education by research participants did not initially stem, as might be expected, from a desire for international migration; nor was it derived from limited access to higher education in Thailand. Instead, the demand for overseas education has

traditionally been driven by the Thai value placed on becoming more 'Western' and developing fluency in the English language, as well as the expectation that international study will temporarily liberate them from social stresses and raises their economic and social status in the Thai hierarchy.

The possibility of Australian permanent residency

All participants were clear that before coming to Australia they did not have a desire to migrate to Australia after the completion of their studies in Australian institutions. Their decision to undertake further study in Australia was not influenced by the possibility of migrating to Australia. My investigation showed that most learnt of the possibility of Australian permanent residency only after arrival in Australia. It is suggested that the desire to migrate to Australia was ignited by studying and living in Australia. However, recent data collected after doing the interviews showed that the possibility of Australian permanent residency (often called PR) was mentioned in some Australian Education Expositions held both in Thailand and Australia, and study courses for PR purposes were discussed. From this, it is likely that nowadays some Thai international students will have a desire to migrate to Australia prior to coming to Australia.

Limited access to higher education

Higher education in Thailand is not so limited that it would lead to significant numbers of Thai students studying abroad. Almost all of my participants were taking courses in Australian

Table 1 Basic pivot table 2011 - Thai student enrolments in Australia

Sector	2008	2009	2010	2011
Higher Education	4,405	4,244	4,145	3,722
Vocational Education and Training (VET)	8,553	11,110	12,102	11,272
Schools	574	572	546	500
English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS)	8,619	10,254	7,824	6,082
Other (Non-Award Courses, Enabling Courses)	206	212	173	125
Total	22,357	26,392	24,790	21,701

Source: Australian Education International (2011).

educational institutions that they knew were available to them in educational institutions in Thailand. Participants indicated that they wished for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study overseas.

The Thai value of being more 'Western' and knowing English

My interviews revealed clearly that the decision to study overseas was influenced by the desire to gain a better understanding of the 'West'. The national development toward modernization and westernization has together over a century ingrained a general desirability in Thai society to be more western and speak English (Stockwell, 2000). The English language has been regarded as a tool for modernization in Thailand (Cohen, 1991). Today, no one would challenge the fact that English is now the pre-eminent language of global communication. Over time, this has provoked the desire of modern Thais at all levels of Thai society to learn English.

International education as an instrumental value

With respect to the value of education, my research findings revealed that 'knowledge-for-knowledge's sake' did not receive a high value in the opinion of these participants. Education is perceived more as a 'means' of climbing the social ladder and of gaining prestige and a higher salary, rather than as an end value in itself. Nineteen of my participants revealed that an international degree was seen as a key to becoming a high profile person and holding social and occupational privileges in Thai society.

In addition, international education was also seen by participants as an option to liberate them from social strains and stresses present in Thai society. For seventeen participants who had been working in Thailand before studying in Australia, the majority revealed that they were bored with their routine lives. They had sought leave from what they perceived as a tiresome existence, and looked forward to the next chapter of their life.

Why choose Australia?

Participants seemed to trust in the standard of study programs offered by any Western developed country. However, they chose Australia because, they believed it was affordable. Compared with the USA and the UK, in Australia it was cheaper (cost for study and living), closer (distance to Thailand), and easier to obtain a student visa. Participants discussed that Australia was well known and seen as the most aggressive player in the educational market. The information accessibility and administrative process for prospective students was readily available and students were able to gain entry somewhere because of the large number of educational institutions. Moreover, the direct entry English language course offered by many Australian institutions would potentially allow students to satisfy the English language requirements to begin their university studies. After successfully completing their English pathway, the students were not required to sit an external English test (such as TOEFL or IELTS) in order to begin their university degree.

Student life in Australia

It was clear that participants initially came to Australia for further education and expected that overseas education in the Western world would be an eye-opening experience, and one they could utilize to their advantage in their career in Thailand. However, participants have changed from being tertiary students in Australia to new Australian immigrants after the completion of their studies. It is therefore necessary to examine life as a Thai international student in Australia to understand the context of how these Thai students come to the decision to seek permanent residency as skilled migrants in Australia.

By studying abroad, participants showed their initiative and eagerness to experience personal and academic challenges which were unavailable in their homeland. Most participants agreed that, in addition to being fun and an exciting adventure,

study in Australia was a unique life-changing experience which could have a lasting impact, helping them grow academically and personally. However, there was a price to be paid for an overseas qualification. In investigating life as an international student in Australia, I explored how research participants initially experienced culture shock in the form of personal and academic challenges during study in Australia.

Academically challenging experiences

Beside academic entry requirements, all international students were required to meet an English language requirement. Before arriving in Australia, participants were not concerned, or indeed informed, about the many varieties of English used in the Western world and thus entered the country unaware of the extent to which local accents, fast speech, and Australian colloquialisms were going to affect their ability to speak and understand English in Australia. It was highly likely that they were not used to the speed, slang, or accent of Australian speakers.

The major sources of complexity were not just the lack of competence in Australian English but also culturally distinctive learning styles. Learning style issues could produce differences in expectations and methods of study, such as styles of teaching and learning, the roles of teachers and students, and the nature and functions of assessment. Almost all of my participants recalled in interviews that they had experienced academic challenges, in terms of both language barriers and in adapting to a new learning culture.

Personally challenging experiences

It is possible to list typical problems that Thai overseas students encounter in Australia. Beside academic challenges, there is, for instance, homesickness. In general, participants need to cope with day-to-day living and might have problems with many other time-consuming non-study activities. They might be perplexed and feel a bit let down from time to time. In practice these difficulties might not be insurmountable, indeed most of these

problems were solved over time but they were not resolved overnight.

Today there is a general acknowledgement that overseas students require an advisor to lessen their burden, and there are a number of student support services throughout Australian educational institutions just for international students looking to get further help (Boonyanate, 1996). However, participants were not familiar with seeking professional help for personal problems. The overall implication of these patterns is that student support services seem to be more useful particularly when students need to negotiate with the university about academic problems but such services may not be taken up when dealing with personal issues. Again, the language/culture nexus is important; at the early stage of studying in Australia almost all participants were struggling with their English communication skills. Due to this language barrier and Thai cultural protocols of ‘saving face’, they could not muster their courage to access the full range of services.

Negotiating ‘culture shock’

My research revealed that the typical way that most participants negotiated culture shock was to integrate themselves to a network of Thai people in Australia, making use of a Thai community as part of an Australian multicultural society. Even though they did not run back to their comfort zones in Thailand, they were most likely to integrate into a network of Thai people in Australia which could then be their new comfort zones in Australia. Despite the attraction of familiarity, many hoped that they would not be “ghettoed” in Australia with other Thais so they would be forced to improve their English while they lived surrounded by other Thais.

My participants revealed clearly that the issue of integrating into Australian-Thai networks did not stem from a desire to preserve Thai culture and reject contact with host members and participation in Australian culture. Instead, Thai student group formation can be seen as ‘today’s integration’ in the particular Australian multicultural

context. The Thai international student group in Australia was arguably more open to integration than would be the case in more explicitly mono-cultural countries. In Australia, a range of different international student communities can readily be seen and Thai students from this perspective are simply one more international group. The benefit to Thai students in grouping with fellow Thais, and other international students, is the confidence and comfort they develop from associations of shared experience. These patterns of interaction affected students' sense of life satisfaction. While the window of opportunity to form international associations in Australia was opened widely, their eagerness to develop a better understanding of English and Western lifestyle, which had previously driven them from Thailand to Australia, seemed to assume less importance in the students' daily lives.

I argue that students' attachment of the Thai community networks in Australia is simply an initial coping strategy that relies on familiar networks to begin the process of integration into multicultural Australia. Participants have portfolios of Thai social networks that could be used to connect them with others for various reasons at various times, because in this way their needs could be met. Participants engage with other Thais through the networks that exist to access accommodation, jobs, place of worship, and many other resources they need. The Thai community can be seen as a gateway to considerable social and economic resources in Australia. These Thai community networks provide the different degree of accessibility, accountability, availability, intimacy, confidentiality, and rewards. They have been connected to Thai social networks since the time of their arrival; they have used these networks to construct their personal world and livelihood.

The Thai restaurant: a gateway to a little Thai society

Apart from taking a school break to visit

Thailand, communicating with friends or family in Thailand over phone and email, or parents occasionally coming to visit them in Australia, most participants (eighteen in total) used Thai restaurants to get in contact with other Thais in Australia. Working in Thai restaurants is the main target for Thai international students who are looking for casual jobs. Thai students work in restaurants as waiters or waitresses, kitchen hands, dish washers and chefs. It is interesting that almost all of my participants had not worked part time in Thailand prior to starting their Australian sojourn. It was not common in Thailand for students (from a middle class family background) to undertake paid work as their parents would supply all their necessities. However, almost all of my participants had work part time while studying in Australia.

Certainly, to obtain an Australian student visa, students are required to show they have the financial resources to live and study in Australia until the end of their study course. Nevertheless, many participants stated that they looked for a casual job because they thought that all other students did this. It could then be argued that during their studies in Australia they had been socialized to accept this as one of the new things they should do in their lives. Moreover, many indicated that they had too much free time during studying in Australia. Their free time made them feel lonely and homesick. Many also believed that doing paid work could lessen their family's financial burden or give them extra money to spend.

Working in Thai restaurants was attractive for many Thai students because students from every area of study could apply. Thai international students could make use of their personal background, reduce meal costs in their living expenses, earn some money to cover their tuition fees and other expenses, practice English with customers, and connect with other Thais. In general, those working in a Thai restaurant for the dinner shift would have dinner at the restaurant before working and supper after working, which they could

take home for breakfast or lunch the next day. A generous owner might allow them to have special authentic Thai meals which did not appear in the menu. Food provided by the restaurant was normally more healthy and balanced than the food students cooked or bought. Students generally received between AUD 45 and AUD 60 per shift: the lunch shift running from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the dinner shift from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Tips would be equally divided between all the staff on that shift. After the dinner shift, some owners arranged a lift for the staff to go back home or to the nearest public transport point.

Eighteen participants who worked in Thai restaurants revealed that after linking into Thai restaurant networks they knew more about Thai festivals or Thai gatherings throughout the year, who was who in the Australian Thai community, what was happening in the Thai community, where to find products and entertainment newly released from Thailand, where to find Buddhist temples and Thai night clubs. Thai restaurants also provided news about happenings in Thailand, particularly information on the latest Thai music, Thai TV programs, movies, politics, and daily news. They were also seen as social spaces for empowering Thai culture in Australia, especially the culture of respect for seniority and authority.

In many cases, participants began working in one place for only one or two shifts per week. For those who had never worked in Thailand before, their sense of independence was kindled and they were happy to receive money for their labor which they were free to save or spend in whatever manner they saw fit. Some bought new clothes, shoes, mobile phones, or even went gambling in the casino. Those who had worked in Thailand and spent their own savings to get to Australia for overseas study often preferred to spend that money more carefully. It was common across all eighteen participants who worked in Thai restaurants that they extended their working hours over a period, sometimes eventually working in two to three places. Like most other

overseas students, Thai international students worked in low skill jobs in which advanced English communication skills were not required. Typically, the student's academic and language skills were not significantly progressed by this type of work experience.

Eventually, almost all participants met the cost of all other expenses involved in living in Australia while their parents supported them for tuition fees. While enjoying working, some of them experienced the effects of work overload which showed up in poor academic results.

Why migrate to Australia after graduation?

The desire of participants to continue to live in Australia after graduation from Australian institutions was stimulated during study abroad. This decision was made after they had successfully adjusted to the culture shock and found their feet in a new environment. The students typically integrated into the Australian-Thai community and made use of these connections to make links to Australia's broader multicultural society. The benefit to Thai students in initially grouping with fellow Thais is the confidence and comfort they could develop, in order to forge links with other student groups and the wider multicultural milieu. This process caused them to consider that Australia is a stimulating and desirable place to live, and this became a key ingredient in the decision to seek Australian permanent residency.

In focusing on the decision making process, I argue that Thai international student immigration is a socially produced outcome, not just a result of individual decisions made by individual actors or crude economic motivations. It is an outcome of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural factors. This paper highlights the importance of non-economic factors in a decision to immigrate, particularly the sense of independence of life that students cultivated in their time studying in Australia. I argue that this relatively greater sense of independence to be found within the host country

can be seen as a critical component in directing Thai skilled migrant flow to Australia.

The value of being more independent

This paper argues that economic disparities alone are not enough to explain international movements. The immigration motivations of these participants were not based solely on current economic opportunities. I found that economic and socio-cultural factors both affected the attractiveness of migration decision making to stay in Australia, but greater impact was found in socio-cultural factors relating to the life style, especially in relation to a sense of an 'independent life'.

From interviews, it was common to hear participants comment on changes in their personal attitudes to life. The willingness to prioritize the individual over the group marked a fundamental shift. This was arguably because of the implications of discovering a new sense of self in their personal and professional relationships, and the potential impact of this sense of self on everyday life. Autonomy was one of the many achievements discussed by participants, particularly among those who had been under parental control at home. It is worth considering that awareness of re-entry problems seemed to be greater among those who came from highly conformist family backgrounds but later developed individualist tendencies while in Australia.

It is important to note that the value for participants of an independent life and self control did not cancel out their respect for their family. Participants emphasized family ties but felt a sense of 'powerlessness' if they were to work or live their life under their family's control. A tangible impact of this ongoing tension between family and self is found in the fact that almost all my participants asked for and received permission from the family before making the decision to migrate permanently to an independent life in Australia. They received support from their family and friends in Thailand for their immigration plan, partly because of the positive image of international migration in

Thailand (Klanarong, 2005). Family support developed from the belief that their children will have a better life and more income if working overseas. In this study, only four participants had an obligation to financially support their family back home, but for other participants the non-economic issues were of primary importance. Participants and their family also perceived that they would be able to maintain their social status in Thailand. They would not lose their social acceptance in the Thai hierarchy after migration.

Legal considerations of migrating to Australia

Legal and social considerations about citizenship and nationality also positively affected participants' perspectives on migration to Australia. Participants and their families were most likely to understand that according to Australia's multiculturalism policy, Australia allows immigrants to apply for Australian citizenship after they have been a lawful permanent resident of Australia for a certain period of time. Also, after achieving Australian citizenship immigrants are also allowed to hold dual citizenship. From the Thai side, Thailand's Nationality Act B.E. 2508 as amended by Acts B.E. 2535 No. 2 and 3 (1992) has opened a possibility for a Thai immigrants to not lose their Thai nationality after migration to another country. It is implied that after migration to Australia, Thai immigrants still retain their Thai nationality unless they declare their intention to renounce Thai nationality to the competent authority or their Thai nationality is revoked by the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand (Nationality Act B.E. 2508 as amended by Acts B.E. 2535 No.2 and 3, 1992, Chapter 2). In this sense, then, Thai people can both 'have their cake and eat it too'. This was a positive influence in immigration decision-making for them and also made it easier for families to give permission to their children to become citizens of Australia, not only just a permanent resident.

The migration decision making process

The individual and the family

There is a polarized debate regarding the social units that drive immigration decisions. One side argues that only individuals make immigration decisions. The other side argues that the family is the reasonable decision making unit, since members of a family usually move together. This study revealed that participants made the initial decision to apply for Australian permanent residency by themselves. They did this after they managed to make some successful adjustments to culture shock and found their feet in a new environment, typically by integration into the Thai community networks in Australia. However, it was rare that participants made the final immigration decision alone. It was almost always a matter which involved other family members. This was not because their family members had a desire to move internationally with their children or participants wanted to move their parents to stay with them in Australia. Participants sought family advice and family permission due to the persistent strength of family ties in the international context and the normative aspects of Thai respect for authority.

Accordingly, it can be argued that the immigration decision-making of Thai overseas students was a personal strategy within a familial socio-cultural context. That context was partly conditioned by the positive image of international migration held by immigrants' family members and Thai society more broadly (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009). As migration to Australia is seen as a channel to affluence, participants received permission from their parents to migrate to Australia after graduation. The family consideration was illustrated in the belief that students will have the better life in terms of income if working overseas. The family assumed that the students would earn a satisfactory living in Australia. Moreover, due to the legal environment, participants could retain their Thai citizenship after migrating to Australia.

Making a choice and negotiating with the family

It is evident that before the completion of their study courses in Australia, participants considered alternative choices for life after graduation, and analyzed what they might encounter under each choice. Expectations, or how the participants visualized new experiences before they happened, could be both positive and negative—how participants imagined things might be close to reality, but sometimes might be far from it. It was obvious that my participants did not want to return to Thailand after graduation as an independent life was now a priority.

In order to achieve their immigration plan, participants negotiated carefully with the family, discussing the benefits of immigration to Australia by relating to Thais' perspectives on international migration as an action that channels affluence, status, and a high standard of living to immigrants and their family back home. Also, still avoiding the question of independence, the mature participants often claimed that "they were getting old". In Thailand, the job market did not provide them much opportunity compared to younger Thais. In Australia, they were working. Even though it was a part time and low skilled occupation, it was sufficient to support them financially while studying. Their net income might be higher than the salary they would have received if they returned to Thailand. In a number of cases they had developed confidence that they might be able to find a full time position after graduation and thus find a better life after immigration.

In most cases, their families eventually accepted their child's immigration proposal and allowed them to remain in Australia. However, in a few cases there was conflict at the beginning of these negotiations derived from the pull between their wills and their families' wills. Most families were told that their child had never intended to spend the rest of their life in Australia. Originally, their child had planned to work and earn money in

Australia and could then become an entrepreneur upon return if they were able to accumulate savings overseas. Such reasoning contributed significantly towards the family giving a student permission to migrate to Australia after graduation.

CONCLUSION

Although immigrants around the globe may have some common experiences, immigration itself is a complex and diverse phenomenon. Immigrants can be differentiated by ethnicity, the reason to immigrate, the stage of the lifecycle at which they move, and the impact of globalization that affects population movement. It assumes that immigrants act and are acted upon with reference to their socio-cultural locations. In utilizing this research finding, a consideration of Thai skilled migration to Australia may offer a better understanding of the process of transnational migration, particularly where it is focused around higher education.

By examining the period of time between my participants' arrival in Australia and the point at which they are willing to consider seeking permanent residency, several significant features of Thai experiences in Australia have shed light on how these young Thai people come to the decision to seek permanent residency outside their homeland. This paper addresses three major arguments in the process of recent Thai skilled migration to Australia.

First, I argue that a demand for overseas education by these participants did not fundamentally stem from a desire for international migration nor was it derived from limited access to higher education in Thailand. Rather, the demand for overseas education has traditionally been driven by the Thai value of being more western and knowing more English as well as the expectation of its ability to temporarily liberate the students from social stresses and to raise their economic and social status in the Thai social hierarchy. This is a result of the growing prestige of international tertiary study, fluency in the English language, and life experience

in English-speaking western countries.

In investigating student life in Australia, the culture shock experienced while moving from Thai to Australian culture was considered from two aspects—the academic experience and the personal dimensions of this transition. After participants had made the initial personal, social, and economic adjustments to life in Australia typically by integration into the Thai community networks in Australia, their lives settled into a steady rhythm and some stability was established. Participants who were able to swim over the river of unfamiliarity learned how culture shock was important for self-development and personal growth. Early feelings of disorientation were replaced by new-found strength; fear of being alone was replaced by a new capacity to withstand stress and enjoy a feeling of independence. Independence, stress and strength were positively linked; studying overseas was now viewed as a testing yet life-changing event. It was common to hear participants say they became stronger because of their improved capacity to manage stress. It was an experience of greater self-understanding, intercultural understanding and change. As their confidence and comfort developed they now had a solid platform from which to consider the possibility of immigration after graduation.

In the immigration decision process, we have seen that there was a mixture of individual and social forces, and personal and familial decision making that explain the motivations of participants to come to Australia, and then to want to remain in Australia. The international migration for participants was seen as a social product, not as the sole result of individual decisions made by individual actors, not as the sole result of economic parameters, but rather as an outcome of both economic and socio-cultural factors in interaction. This paper highlights the greater experience of independence in the host country as a factor in the decision to migrate. The sense of independence of life cultivated in the time studying in Australia was

a critical component in directing Thai skilled migrant flow to Australia.

The participants of the research project have challenged the Australian assumption (or perhaps stereotype) of the traditional Thai immigrant as unskilled, poorly educated, someone who finds English language acquisition difficult, and who is uncomfortable outside the local Thai community. The Thai people in this research are skilled immigrants, they added further degrees to their qualifications while in Australia, and their participation in the Thai community is both strategic in getting them established in Australia, but also reflects mobility between the Thai world and the wider Australian society. This permeability between the Thai community and Australian civic society is arguably a significant shift from more traditional patterns of Thai migration.

The participants are not only positioned within an Australian imaginary in which they are in fact part of actively shifting to something new, but they are also positioned within a Thai imaginary of what Western or overseas life is like in Australia—that it is very ‘comfortable’, wealthy, and luxurious with a high standard of living. As they continued to engage with their home Thai families and communities, they necessarily engage with Thai people’s imagined Australia. Indeed, their experience of living in Australia is extraordinarily challenging such that participants were often posed the question, with an overseas education higher degree, an English language qualification, and the opportunities that will open up in Thailand, why do you want to stay in Australia in an ordinary job? The value of personal choice and independence, which become so attractive and compelling to many Thais after they have made some successful adjustment to Australian society, may not make any sense to some of their friends and family who continue to be fully involved in Thai society and culture at home, but it is a powerful decision-making factor in the Australian context. Nevertheless, sensing the incomprehension, these Thai skilled immigrants

explain to their Thai friends and family at home that they stay in Australia because they are making a reasonable income. The fact is, of course, money is not the primary factor to be considered in the social decision making matrix that Thai skilled immigrants work through.

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