

# Collective Imaginings in the Interactions of a Lifestyle Migrant Community:

Japanese Retirees in Chiang Mai, Thailand

SHIBUYA Miwa

Department of Regional Studies,  
School of Cultural and Social Studies,  
The Graduate University for Advanced Studies, SOKENDAI

## Summary

It is increasingly common for elderly persons from relatively wealthy nations to cross borders to seek an enjoyable retirement overseas. This migratory flow can be categorized as a lifestyle migration in which the primary agenda of the migration is to pursue a better quality of life. In migration studies, the newly-arising phenomenon of lifestyle migration has been examined extensively from various perspectives. However, extant studies have not sufficiently delved into relationships within ethnic migrant communities at destinations and what factors are involved in constructing social contacts between migrants from the same country in transnational settings, even though many lifestyle migrants often congregate with persons from the same country and have little interaction with locals in the host society. Drawing upon the data from one year of fieldwork and follow-up interviews with a focus on Japanese lifestyle migrants living in Chiang Mai, Thailand, this article highlights what the author refers to as “collective imaginings of ethnic members,” which is a key to understanding the dynamics among those members. The term “collective imaginings of ethnic members” refers to the stereotyped representation of a migrating agency, i.e., who are the typical migrants, which is widely acknowledged within an ethnic community. Interacting with postmigration experiences, stereotyped imaginings arise from an assemblage of the global and bilateral histories of sending and receiving societies and structural conditions that enabled migration for self-fulfilment. The author argues that the imaginings powerfully operate to shape communal interactive practices in lifestyle migrant communities. This article suggests that the collective imaginings of ethnic members, rooted in cultural meanings of destinations, are a significant factor in establishing social practices in an ethnic community. The findings encourage scholars to pay close attention to migration tales widely believed within an ethnic community. By doing so, researchers have become able to better understand how dynamics are configured and ordered inside specific ethnic boundaries in relation to a given destination context.

**Key words:** Japanese retirees in Thailand, retirement migration, lifestyle migrant community, imaginings, interactive practice

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## Introduction

Transnational mobility that falls into the category of “lifestyle migration” is flourishing more than ever. Lifestyle migration is conceptualized as a temporary or permanent move to a place for a better quality of life for migrants (Benson and O’Reilly 2009: 609). This conceptual framework covers many forms of mobility, including international retirement migration. This article uses a case study of senior Japanese lifestyle migration<sup>1)</sup> in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to explore how the social lives of migrants are shaped. The findings show that intraethnic dynamism arises from collective perceptions of community members. I argue that the interactive practices among migrants from the same homeland are built around what I call the “collective imaginings of ethnic members”. This phrase refers to stereotyped ethnic community members who lifestyle migrants widely imagine in their destination. In this study, the phrase, therefore, refers to the stereotyped retiree Japanese migrants who many Japanese migrants in Chiang Mai imagined were living there.

Place as a destination often (if not always) contains cultural meanings for travelers via mass media images (Appadurai 1996; Salazar 2011), sociopolitical discourses and ideologies (Johnson 2019), and stories and material products (McKay 2006). Value-laden imaginings of place motivate people to cross borders at an intersection of their personal aspirations and structural conditions. Imaginings also shape postmigration realities

(Benson and O’Reilly 2015). This study illustrates that imaginings of place are also involved in creating stereotyped images of lifestyle migrants within ethnic boundaries. Accordingly, the stereotypes shape a basic landscape of social practices among the same ethnic lifestyle migrants.

It has been pointed out that lifestyle migration experiences usually contain two contradictory aspirations, namely, for novelty and for the comfort of relatively familiar companionship (Amit 2007). For instance, despite their initial hopes for a new life in migration (Toyota and Thang 2017), migrants often linger within an ethnic enclave (Hayes and Carlson 2018; Ono 2008). Such boundary maintenance is a coping strategy for migrants to accommodate newness in their transnational domain (Cohen 1977). Therefore, ethnic cohesion is natural and helpful for lifestyle migrants, especially new migrants, to go through cross-cultural experiences (Casado-Diaz 2009).

The importance of their migrant community may increase for senior lifestyle migrants due to the increasing likelihood of physical deterioration as they age. Older migrants sometimes find social bonds with their ethnic migrants in destinations vital to tackling their own health issues, because older ones often form their informal networks of mutual help (Green 2016; Oliver 2017). In this respect, for senior lifestyle migrants, interactions with migrants of the same homeland are crucial not only for day-to-day living but also for their life-and-death matters in new locations. Nevertheless, as

Benson and Osbaldiston who comprehensively reviewed papers mainly on Westerners' lifestyle migration say, "There has been surprising little focus" (2016: 413), apart from a few studies (Hayes 2015; Hayes and Carlson 2018; O'Reilly 2002; Oliver and O'Reilly 2010), lifestyle migration studies have paid relatively scant attention to ethnic/cultural communities in destination and what dynamism is produced with respect to interpersonal relationships through migration (Green 2015; Shakuto 2019).

On the other hand, research on Japanese lifestyle migration has been accumulating insight into the intraethnic community (Kawahara 2010; Nagatomo 2007; Shakuto 2017). The studies of Nagatomo (2007) and Shakuto (2017) whose research fields were in Australia and Malaysia respectively suggest that Japan's corporative work ethic and productivity are key to understanding intraethnic relationships. However, Japanese migrants in these countries are known to be those who belong to relatively high social status in homeland. Compared to that, Thailand which lures many Japanese migrants to its far lower living costs (Ono 2015), a different intraethnic dynamism may roll out. Kawahara's study (2010) is helpful to see how retiree Japanese migrants relate to one another in Thailand. Yet, the study primarily focuses on one expatriate club. During a vast amount of time that many Japanese migrants are expected to spend outside the club, how social interactions operate is not fully investigated.

Consequently, knowledge remains limited about the dynamism between migrant retirees of the same homeland. This article aims to provide insight into this somewhat neglected domain by exploring how retiree lifestyle migrants practice intraethnic communication.

The findings encourage scholars to focus on the

dominant belief within an ethnic community about "who migrated to a particular destination". In the following section, I will focus first on how collective imaginings are involved in a lifestyle migration phenomenon before discussing intraethnic dynamism among senior Japanese migrants living in Chiang Mai.

### **Lifestyle migrant community and Imaginings**

Lifestyle migrants are different from other types of migrants in the respect of their prerogative. Lifestyle migrants possess a notable degree of privilege relative to locals of their chosen host societies (Benson 2013, 2015; Croucher 2018; Hayes 2014, 2015; O'Reilly 2014; Toyota and Thang 2017). Structurally located within a global elite (O'Reilly and Benson 2009), migrants' privileged status functions as a barrier against most locals. Exclusivity may inevitably emerge from the ethnic solidarity of prerogative migrants in host societies (Fechter 2007). However, lifestyle migrants are not always privileged in their homelands. They are sometimes driven to migrate for financial security (Hayes 2014). Thus, when analyzing the characteristics of a lifestyle migrant community in a given place, at least two perspectives need bearing in mind: migrants' prerogative in global mobile structures and their social milieu in their homeland.

The two factors, a lifestyle migrant's prerogative in destination and home-country status, influence the social landscape inside the migrant community. For example, Hayes' (2015) ethnography on North American lifestyle migrants in Ecuador shows that some migrants relate to locals through a racialized identity of "whiteness". Such a hegemonic attitude towards Ecuadorians generates deep antipathy among other migrants of the same

cultural community. It is because embracing privilege of being white, which contributes to reproduction of racial hierarchies, makes migrants morally uncomfortable (Green 2017). Consequently, relationships inside this cultural enclave seem fractured (Hayes 2015). Further, a study of Britons in Spain highlights the importance of the migrants' home-country status. Their status-related lifestyle tastes enact the power of forming the interactions among migrants, even in their postmigration lives (Oliver and O'Reilly 2010). These two studies indicate that a focus on "who migrates to which destination" is necessary for exploring intraethnic dynamism. Regarding "who migrates", research has thus far concentrated on white Westerners (Benson 2015: 22). There is a need to examine how non-Caucasian lifestyle migrant communities are configured where the symbolic capital of whiteness is not deeply involved in the dynamism.

Regarding "which destination", many studies point out the importance of collective imaginings in decisions of where to move. People must first imagine both distant places and the people in them before moving (Salazar and Smart 2011). For lifestyle migrants, destinations are chosen as a possible place to realize a subjectively good life. This decision-making process is where collective imaginings of place come into play: "the material and social construction of particular places offering an alternative way of living is crucial; this is what explains the exact destinations chosen" (O'Reilly and Benson 2009: 3).

However, the power of imaginings surpasses merely abstract fantasies about a destination. Scholars argue that imaginings are employed as an everyday social practice for people to enact their lives (Appadurai 1996). In the context of migration, imaginings are employed to bring about a change in the form of physical mobility (Benson 2012;

Salazar 2011) or virtual mobility (Alexander 2018; Hammons 2016) for travelers to enact their own lives. Imaginings are also powerful in that they are meaning-making and world-shaping devices (Salazar 2011) that guide cultural members' perceptions of reality. For example, imaginings help cultural members classify people outside of their homeland as tourists, migrants, refugees and so forth (Frello 2008). Also, it is through a lens of imaginings that people's boundary-crossing movements make sense such as: who moves or stays (Vivaldi 2011) or what material and spiritual gains travelers receive from migration (Lim 2013).

The power of imaginings further extends into postmigration experiences. Within the ethnic communities of destinations, lifestyle migrants likely encounter and interact with others who have imaginings-inspired aspirations for a particular lifestyle. The culturally coloured aspirations are personal, yet at the same time collective as well because the desired lifestyle in a specific destination is heavily influenced by both mediatized representations and his or her homeland's sociocultural environment (Benson 2012, 2013; Shakuto 2017). In this respect, ethnic communities of lifestyle migrants can be seen as products that mediate collective imaginings. Here arises a question: do collective imaginings influence interactive practices inside ethnic lifestyle migrant communities and if so, how?

## **Methodology**

This article is based on interviews and participant observations in Chiang Mai gathered from 2012 to 2013. I conducted semistructured conversations with 20 Japanese males and 12 females, aged 58 to 79 years, most of whom I conversed with multiple times (see Appendix). All conversations were done in the Japanese language.

The length of their stay ranged from 1 to 14 years, with an average of 5 years. The open-ended questions aimed to explore their migration motives, their understandings and feelings of being a migrant, and how life in Thailand compared to that in Japan. Initially, I used an IC recorder when permitted. But in the latter part of the research, I took only notes and transcribed them on my computer soon after conversations finished. Follow-up interviews were performed with three informants in 2019. Unless otherwise noted, however, all the data hereinafter are the ones collected in 2012–2013.

Added to the interviews, to better understand retirees' daily life, I stayed in a popular Japanese apartment in Chiang Mai for a month in 2013. During my stay, there were 16 males (including one who was absent) and 6 females occupying the 20 rooms. All the residents were Japanese. Most were in their 60s, and a few were in their 70s. The complex had a cozy lounge, where three to five residents normally gathered once or twice a day to chat for at least an hour. The rent was 5,000 baht a month, which was more affordable than other popular Japanese accommodations.

What is (not) told in interpersonal communication is greatly influenced by the relationship between interlocutors. Thus, it is important to note my positionality in relation to senior Japanese migrants. As of the fieldwork, I was a Japanese woman in her mid-20s and a graduate student. My ethnic origin gave me insider quality which facilitated interaction with Japanese retirees, whereas my age trait and a researcher position affected a sense of the sameness with them. I tactically emphasized my student identity to present my humility and ignorance about the intraethnic matters in the encounter with my interlocutors (Mullings 1999). The communication

using my insider/outsider status, I believe, allowed me to access them without posing a great threat (Carling et al. 2014). As discussed later, the Japanese community I explored was where retirees tended to highly guard their privacy. Despite so, most seemed fine telling me their personal history and secrecy. One informant even confessed that he had obtained a retirement visa illegally before because he could not afford it. I believe their comfort with me was related to my double positionality. All the names used here are pseudonyms.

### Japanese Retirement Flows to Thailand

Thailand has consistently been one of the most popular destinations for Japanese retirement migration since the early 2000s. One factor contributing to the stable popularity is Thailand's visa system. The country has established retirement visas: one-year retirement visas called "O-A visa" and 10-year retirement visas called "O-X visa". O-A visa is issued to people aged 50 years and above who fulfill certain financial criteria whereas O-X visa whose financial requirements are severer is issued to aged 50 years and above from only certain countries including Japan. The visa system was strategically introduced as part of the national development policy (Toyota and Xiang 2012). The Thai government hoped that these retirement visa holders who were considered as sufficiently affluent retirees would boost the Thai economy by enjoying a spending spree.

However, against the government's initial expectation, fewer Japanese retirees have engaged in extravagant spending practices. Luxurious retirement services catering to Japanese seniors are oversupplied (Toyota and Thang 2017). One major reason is that many Japanese retirees simply cannot afford high-end products; some are

economically so marginalized that they choose Thailand to stretch their limited incomes (Toyota 2006; Toyota and Thang 2017). Nine of my 32 informants told me their primary migration motive was financial security. Moving to Thailand has become a more and more strategic option for these marginalized retirees to save their expenses. Japanese mass media takes part in forming this flow of economic refugees. Mass-mediated images spread Thailand as a place where its lower living cost allows even Japanese people with economic hardship to enjoy a materially satisfying lifestyle.

In this context, the choice of Thailand as a destination informs each Japanese migrant about the socioeconomic status of Japanese migrants in Thailand. The decision of where to migrate for retirement life is, needless to say, associated with structural constraints such as visa conditions and living costs in any given destination. Because retirees' livelihoods greatly lie in their pension and available financial assets, their destination choice is inseparable from the matter of how affluent they are prior to migration. In this sense, a retirement destination is a good reference for Japanese retirees to judge the premigration income levels of other retiree Japanese migrants (see also Shakuto 2019). My informants often compared Thailand with other popular retirement destinations in the West such as Hawaii where the living costs are considerably higher. Migrants in Chiang Mai usually think that counterparts in those destinations are super-rich, whereas they call themselves less well-off, some of whom are driven out of Japan for financial struggles. In sum, Thailand's relative leniency of economic migration hurdles orients Japanese retirees to regard senior Japanese migrants in the country as either a middle or a lower socioeconomic class in the homeland. Subsequently, Japanese-shared meanings of "the

affordable destination" help retiree migrants imagine the displaced retirees in Thailand.

Added to the economic evacuation phenomenon, another characteristic of Japanese retirement migration to Thailand is a gender gap. Despite no official statistics available, Toyota's research (2006) implies that most elderly Japanese migrants in Thailand are male, similar to situations of Western ones (Jaisuekun and Sunanta 2016). This gendered phenomenon is highly relevant to images of Thailand, namely sex-related representations that are the driving force to lure inbound tourists and migrants (Jaisuekun and Sunanta 2016; Nuttavuthisit 2007). For instance, Mr. Yamaguchi decided to look for a partner abroad to fulfill his long-held dream of having a child when his wife passed away in Japan. Upon thinking of a place to move to, he chose Thailand which he thought would offer a higher likelihood of encountering a young partner. Similarly, other retiree migrants often refer to sex-related comments such as prostitution and intimacy with Thai women when describing Thailand.

The erotic images of Thailand among Japanese retirees are rooted in history. Sexual services were provided for US servicemembers in Thailand during Vietnam War, and later consumed by the public including tourists (Brodeur et al. 2018). During the 1960s and 1970s, Japan became deeply involved in Thai prostitution. Although the sex trade has been illegal in Thailand since 1960, tour packages to the country involving commercial sex services were openly operated for Japanese tourists until the 1980s (Yokota 2006). Subsequently, in the 1990s, Japanese tourists were the largest spenders in the Thai sex tourism market (Leheny 1995). Even today, Thailand's deeply rooted, decades-old sex appeal seems to lure some male Japanese retirees to the country.

Migration in search of a romance with a Thai woman is, however, generally seen as rather negative. The critical eyes are often cast based on the belief that Japanese males attract Thai women by using the gained value of Japanese yen from migration. A liaison with a local partner tends to be stigmatized as questionable practices, namely sexual exploitation. One widowed man received a fierce objection from his family members to his migration to Thailand, since they incorrectly assumed that he would intend to find a Thai woman by a financial means. As what this widowed man went through, the context of Thai destinations is likely to put male Japanese migrants in the questionable position of moral violators. The country's erotic image helps to orient Japanese retirees to stereotypically depict male Japanese migrants, especially single ones, as amoral men.

To satisfy such diverse and multiple desires as economic and romantic needs, many Japanese retirees have chosen Thailand for resettlement today, and Chiang Mai is especially a favored destination. The city's popularity is probably because the multifaceted needs of retirees are well balancedly met. Three major reasons did my informants commonly pick out why they chose Thailand for migration: good amenities for everyday life, its lower living cost, and the warm climate. Chiang Mai lies in the combination of these charms. Japanese language services are available in various commercial sectors such as banks and apartments in the city. There is no difficulty finding Japanese foods at a supermarket. With such well-developed service infrastructure for foreigners, the city offers less expensive amenities than Bangkok (Isaacs 2009). Besides, as located in the northern part of Thailand, Chiang Mai has relatively mild weather with lower humidity. In short, Japanese retirees in the city can

enjoy everyday life with less concern over their budget in its climatic comfort.

As of 2013, roughly about 2,000 sedentary Japanese retirees resided in the city throughout a year, according to the estimation of Chiang Mai Japanese Association, a major expatriate organization (personal interview in 2013). However, the population appears to have declined since then. Another large expatriate club whose most members are retirees dropped its membership to 128 people in 2019 from 165 in 2011. Yamagishi's 2019 study (cited in Nishikito 2020) estimates that the population of Japanese over 60 years old residing in Chiang Mai is 1,440. One cause of the seemingly shrinking population may be the rapid aging of the retiree Japanese community in Chiang Mai (Miyashita et al. 2017).

### **Anonymous, distrustful relationships in the retiree Japanese community**

Most Japanese retirees linger in the relatively closed society of "Japaneseness" in Chiang Mai. A language barrier is relevant to the phenomenon. Almost all my respondents had little language proficiency in Thai or other languages. On one hand, the language barrier kept Japanese retirees from forming friendship ties with non-Japanese speakers in the destination. On the other hand, intersecting with their privileged position, the barrier functioned to facilitate contact with some Thai locals via capital in the market. As aforementioned, in various commercial sectors from banks to hospitals where detailed communication with Thais was necessary to have a comfortable transnational life for retirees, the Japanese language was commodified as an added-value service and a Japanese-speaking local was stationed as their communicator. By use of the migration-given value of the Japanese yen which

allowed Japanese retirees a prerogative, they incorporated Japanese-speaking locals into their everyday lives as subjects who helped maintain the “Japaneseness”. Such a structural superiority on the global level made retirees less likely to learn the Thai language out of necessity. It also contributed to minimizing interactions with non-Japanese speakers, which led migrants to spend their vast time mingling with the same nationals. When I asked a retiree about his/her everyday postmigration life, an answer usually came with experiences involving other Japanese or narratives passed from them. As far as social interactions of Japanese retirees in Chiang Mai are concerned, most of them find themselves in an environment similar to that in Japan, even in the transnational setting.

Within the vibrant interactions between retiree Japanese migrants, I observed two pervasive natures underneath their relationship: anonymity and distrust. Here, anonymity means that an individual retiree’s past/present life in Japan is purposely concealed from other Japanese migrants. Retirees usually do not ask others about their biographical details. Relatedly, it is also undesirable to inquire into one’s motivation for moving to Chiang Mai because an individual’s life can be inferred from his/her migration motive.

Anonymous practices per se may not be very surprising in the case of lifestyle migration if we take into account the migration objective cliché; the desire of “starting one’s life over” is often weaved in the migration motive (Benson and O’Reilly 2009). Many lifestyle migrants initially endeavor to keep their premigration lives hidden, so that they can rewrite their biography in a destined location. Some migrants are extreme in that they stay away from anything domestic, including distancing themselves from their

countries’ expatriate clubs to cultivate a new self (Benson 2010). Despite such initial efforts, many migrants eventually end their nameless status due to their failure to transform into somebody new (Amit 2007).

However, this is not easily applicable to the retiree Japanese community in Chiang Mai. It is not very rare that the community members remain unidentified for abnormally long durations, as is the case of Mr. Taki and Mr. Okada. Both were residents in the researched condominium and regular chatting members. They had known each other for over a decade, conversing in person daily. One night when I happened to be alone with Mr. Taki, he started talking about Mr. Okada, who normally wore a shabby T-shirt and half pants and spent his daytime staying laid back in the lobby. As rather hard it was to judge Mr. Okada from his appearance and everyday life, he was actually from a wealthy family in Northeast Japan, according to Mr. Taki. Mr. Okada had to return to his hometown to address his vast familial inheritance when the Great East Japan Earthquake hit. Mr. Taki told me of Mr. Okada’s respectable familial origin, but actually, Mr. Taki was uncertain if it was true. He had simply heard the story from a third party without a reliable source. He knew almost nothing about Mr. Okada’s basic biography such as: why Mr. Okada had moved to Chiang Mai or how he had made a living before. Given their long-year mingling through everyday chat, it sounded strange. Yet, the case of the two men was neither exceptional nor extremely rare in Chiang Mai. Robust anonymity underneath lively communication was pervasively seen here and there throughout the Japanese community.

Distrust is another common nature in interactions between retiree Japanese migrants. The

phrase is frequently heard that Japanese people in Chiang Mai are rather weird or dubious and everyone should be on guard against their neighbours (see also Toyota and Thang 2017). Dubiousness is usually associated with monetary affairs. C.L.L. club, one major expatriate organization, published a guidebook for Japanese retirees living in the city. In the book, an unidentified writer warns readers that they should distrust the kindness concerning business deals which is offered by a local and/or a Japanese migrant. Their kindness is a strategy to scam Japanese retirees. The writer is saying, “If the person is Japanese, you are more prone to trust him or her. That’s what is more dangerous” (C.L.L. club 2012: 24, author’s translation).

One scene in casual conversation among three men captures how pervasively suspicion is a common mindset within the Japanese community. The three were residents in the researched condominium. They were talking about their friend, a Japanese retiree in his mid-60s. He met a Thai woman in her mid-30s, and they decided to marry after a few encounters. The friend paid a large sum of dowry to the bride’s family. However, they divorced in less than a month. The three residents agreed that their friend had been cheated out of his money through this marriage. The following conversation then took place:

Mr. Koike: When I looked at the partner, the woman in the photo, she was pretty beautiful. Then, it turned out to be a calculating motive. No wonder. A woman in her 30s cannot marry a man in his 60s.

Mr. Sada: He met her through an introduction by a Japanese person.

I heard that the Japanese who introduced them keeps company with bad Japanese.

Mr. Hori: A Japanese person introduced? That’s fishy.

Mr. Sada: That’s right! *Nihonjin wo shinjiru nante bakadana* (It was stupid of him to believe Japanese people).

Mr Hori’s remark, “A Japanese person introduced? That’s fishy”, corresponds to the common belief that Japanese people are involved in dubious transactions. Notably, the use of “*Nihonjin*” by Mr. Sada refers to Japanese people in general rather than to the specific Japanese person who introduced the Thai woman. Mr. Sada implicitly suggested that people should not believe other Japanese individuals as a rule. His remark could appear offensive to Mr. Koike and Mr. Hori, who were both Japanese nationals. Laughing and nodding, however, they seemed to agree with Mr. Sada. Apparently, they had no problem mentioning that each must be wary of Japanese migrants in Chiang Mai. Similar to them, the practice was also commonly seen in the Japanese community that retirees advised each other not to easily trust other Japanese migrants who could be scammers. Interestingly, such scam discourse often described the complicity of a Japanese man and a Thai woman. There is no judging whether this discourse reflected reality, but it implicated that the Japanese community shared the idea that a person to watch out for was not a woman but a man.

It should be clarified, though, that not every relationship between senior Japanese migrants involved anonymity and distrust. Without a doubt, there are other kinds of relationships observed. My argument here is the Japanese community is far from a harmonious cultural organization but multilaterally divided internally via distrust, as well as externally via foreign language proficiency (Fechter 2007; Hayes 2015) The ethnic boundaries

are not naturally maintained as given cultural products (Barth 1969). Rather, it is realized through migrants' privileged positions which allow them to enjoy a comfortable transnational life even by speaking only Japanese as well as their continuous intraethnic practices. I intend to highlight the pervasive and somewhat peculiar interactive practices between migrants that contribute to the social stability of the Japanese community in Chiang Mai.

### **Causes of anonymity and distrust**

This section will explain that anonymous and distrustful interactive natures arose greatly from two stereotyped images of Japanese retirees; one is an economically displaced migrant and the other one is, when male, a sexual exploiter. Japanese retirees in Chiang Mai share the belief that quite a few Japanese retirees migrate to Chiang Mai for financial security and/or sexual exploitation. The face-to-face communication principles are subjected to the culturally-shared belief. As aforementioned, the two stereotyped migrants shape up via migratory structural constraints and the historical traces. Simultaneously, post-migration experiences are also involved in having the stereotypical views circulated and entrenched well. I will first illustrate this point, and then show the connection between the stereotypes and the interactive practices.

O'Reilly (2014) states that collective imaginings are shaped by constant interactive processes between structure and agency. It means that collective imaginings are always open to the possibility of modification or otherwise confirmation through a migrant's actual encounter with significations throughout migration experiences. In the case of Chiang Mai, post-migration experiences are contributors to the stereotyped

imaginings of the destination and retiree migrants. For example, when my informants threw critical eyes at male Japanese migrants as sex exploiters, the reason they thought males actually committed sexual amorality was, all too often, based on what they experienced in Chiang Mai. My informants usually exemplified age-gaped couples of young Thai women and senior Japanese men who they saw or gossiped about in order to rationalize the stereotyped amoral men. Torkington (2012) argues that place images are socially and discursively constructed, and thus shared by members of a social group. The shared images are stereotypical ones that are subjected to extreme simplification. In Chiang Mai, verbal practices and symbolic representation play in (re)constructing and sustaining simplistic images of Thailand where Japanese men exploit locals.

Importantly, people act on collective imaginings (O'Reilly 2014). Mr. and Mrs. Ohe illustrate it well. They migrated four years before to realize the husband's hope to play golf a lot. Mrs. Ohe herself enjoyed the transnational life by joining many cultural activities, but she still minded staying away from Japan for long to keep her social ties there. To compromise their conflicting desires, the couple traveled back and forth together between the two countries in a year. In front of her husband, Mrs. Ohe explained to me, half-jokingly and half-seriously, why she accompanied him despite her option to stay alone in Japan. In her opinion, Thailand was such a country that many Japanese males had affairs with local women. Thus, she had to watch out for her husband's deeds. She had even warned Mr. Ohe before that if he dares to go to Chiang Mai alone in the future, she will assume it as his infidel attempt to make a young girlfriend, and he will no longer have a home to return to in Japan. Responding to the wife's jocular but

assertive words, Mr. Ohe denied the possibility of going alone. The couple respectively acted on imaginings of Thailand infused with sexual meanings by staying physically close to each other. This case exhibits that individual migrants shape their interactive practices in relation to collective imaginings.

Anonymous communication can be regarded as the intraethnic pervasive act on imaginings. In general, we meticulously operate face-to-face interactions that avoid embarrassing our interactant, simply because we consider it a moral obligation (Goffman 1967). Following this interactive rule, Japanese retirees commonly avoid asking a male retiree about his personal life. The reason is that a detailed biography might make some men expose their embarrassing sex-related amorality. Ms. Kojima illustrated this:

I don't talk about a personal story with other migrants, like the person's life in Japan, family or whether being rich or not... (The reason is) there would be something the person does not want to tell me. For example, for those who live with a woman in Chiang Mai, I had better not ask about their life in Japan, right? For these people, personal questions could expose a secret that they want to cover up. (interviewed in 2019)

Similarly, the other stereotyped imagining, the economically displaced Japanese retiree was being (re)constructed and sustained socially and discursively in Chiang Mai. For instance, the Japanese free paper "Chao", widely circulated in the city, posted an article called "*Konkyu hojin ga fuetekisona chenmai?*" (Will the destitute Japanese increase in Chiang Mai?) (issued on 10 Feb 2013). Besides, Japanese migrants without retirement

visas, some of whom may be economic refugees (Toyota and Thang 2017), actively share information on tourist visas for a 60-day stay. The stay duration may be extended by leaving Thailand every 30 days. Taking a day trip across the Thai border for a 30-day extension is a quite common practice in the Japanese community. Residents in the researched site taught each other about the practice. Simultaneously, they also put warning of the risk that the extension may be denied at some point after repeated pendulum movements. As if the risk was responded to, Japanese-written advertisements for visa agency services were seen everywhere in the city or on printed media. The service sales point was to help clients with no financial means to obtain a retirement visa. The service implicated the illegality of visa acquisition. Displaced Japanese retirees flexibly employ their tactics to stay in Thailand by defying legal definitions and formal arrangements (Toyota and Xiang 2012). These discursive and actual practices in the destination possibly engaged in (re)producing and supporting the imaginings of Chiang Mai and displaced retirees.

In fact, the imaginings of displaced Japanese migrants in Chiang Mai were widespread throughout the community. During the fieldwork, one rumor circulated: a homeless Japanese retiree wandered into a city bus terminal in Chiang Mai. This retiree had migrated with little financial resources from Japan. Eventually, his remaining money ran out, and then he ended up becoming a homeless wanderer who slept in the bus terminal. This rumor originated from a report written and printed in Japan (Shimokawa 2012). Though no respondents had ever encountered the homeless migrant, the gossip circulated with a certain credibility. Elias and Scotson (1994) argue that gossip is not an independent phenomenon; to

produce a story and have it shared as gossip, a common norm or belief is necessary within a grouped population. What the story of the homeless retiree passed around suggests that the Japanese community shared a common belief, i.e., that the city accommodated migrants who financially struggled in both their pre- and postmigration lives.

Similar to imaginings of amoral males, individuals act on the imagined displaced retirees. For instance, Mr. Taki worked on self-representation. He himself was not economically marginalized. Unlike most Japanese males, he often wore a business shirt and drove in his luxurious brand-name automobile. For him, the attire and a high-class vehicle were necessary symbols to distinguish himself from other displaced Japanese retirees. According to him, those displaced migrants wore such casual clothes as a T-shirt and traveled in a local share cab or by bicycle. Mr. Taki showed off the materialistic symbols so that people could recognize him as a retiree with sufficient disposable income. The features of the displaced Japanese Mr. Taki depicted may be illegitimate since many Japanese retirees I saw were in a casual style and did not own vehicles. Besides, judging by economically displaced informants and the other ones, it seemed no clear-cut differences in symbolic representations or lifestyles, in contrast to typical European cases (Oliver and O'Reilly 2010). But the point here is that Mr. Taki acted on his imaginings of impoverished Japanese; his self-representation was crafted in relation to his internalized image of the displaced migrants.

Anonymous and distrustful communication are understandable as the intraethnic pervasive act on imaginings of displaced retirees. Retirees remain anonymous so as not to touch on the topic of their

own or interlocutor's possible financial hardship. In other words, anonymity primarily results from a moral obligation not to embarrass displaced seniors by keeping their lower socioeconomic status hidden (Goffman 1967). But there is more of that. Anonymous contact has a self-protection meaning for some retirees. When my informants expressed their concern about Japanese scammers, they tended to think that scammers were displaced Japanese retirees; they cheated other Japanese migrants to compensate for their financial deficiency. The logic is perhaps relevant to their status of being retirees. Technically, it is impossible that most Japanese retirees gain regular income from work in Thailand, due to visa conditions of employment prohibition. Their retiree positions could make rather convincing the belief that economically displaced Japanese gain money by cheating. Certainly, the extent to which they were actually concerned varies from retiree to retiree. Some may just say so. But one informant was so apprehensive that he told his apartment owner not to rent a room to a poor-looking Japanese retiree. For these retirees, keeping one's socioeconomic background hidden gains meaning to avoid a scam target. Ms. Kawamoto articulated this point. She returned to Japan after a 16-year stay in Chiang Mai. When I talked in 2019, she recollected a feature of her interactions with other Japanese as follows:

There was something that we had better not ask the Japanese over there (about their personal history)...There were many kinds of people (in Chiang Mai). Some were dangerous. What I mean by dangerous is people who had to leave Japan for some reason, like financial difficulty. I did not meet these people personally, but everyone advised me to be

careful. So, I didn't tell my personal history, nor did I ask.

Salazar (2011) explains that collective imaginings are historically laden and spatially transmitted to different cultural arenas. These imaginings and meanings have the power to shape reality even after migration because migrants act on them through how they live in a destination (Benson and O'Reilly 2015: 30). For instance, by use of their imaginings, migrants shape their own and others' subjectivity in their postmigration lives (Salazar 2011). In Chiang Mai, Japanese retirees shaped themselves and other Japanese seniors within their imaginings and meanings of both destination and retiree migrants. Thus, Ms. Kawamoto could tangibly recognize "dangerous" Japanese retirees who emerged from collective imaginings, even though she had never encountered them. Imagined dangerous retirees shaped her surrounding reality in the destination. Her act on collective imaginings led her to anonymous practices for communication. In sum, the cultural meanings of Thailand among retiree Japanese migrants powerfully oriented migrants to imagine a particular retiree in their destination. Accordingly, their interaction was built on the pillars of anonymity and distrust.

## Conclusion

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Chiang Mai, this article explored the nature of the relationships among Japanese retiree migrants and the factors involved. The findings show that the collective imaginings of ethnic members influence interactive practices within a lifestyle migrant community. The community's imaginings emerge from migratory structural conditions and particular histories in tandem with empirical postmigration data. Some

studies have delineated important factors that cause relational complexity within the ethnic boundaries of lifestyle migrants. Divisions within migrant enclaves are established through cultural tastes (Oliver and O'Reilly 2010) or, in the case of Caucasian migration to non-Western societies, through race (Hayes 2015). This study proposes imagining as another research perspective for analyzing intraethnic social lives.

To understand the mechanism of communication practices in the retiree Japanese community, Charles Taylor's theory (2002) is helpful. Taylor argues that a social life operates according to underlying practices, through which a mass of people in a society commonly understand their social surroundings and positions within it. He terms this shared understanding "the social imaginary", which is transmitted through images, stories, and legends, whereby the social imaginary enables us to exercise mutual practices. Social life is sustained by people's notion of how their society runs, who constitutes it, how they fit in it and what legitimate actions towards others are acceptable (Taylor 2002).

Regarding the notion of "who constitutes" the community in Chiang Mai, retirees shared the stereotypes of their ethnic members. The stereotyped Japanese migrant arose from collective imaginings and meanings of Thailand as a place offering economic security and sexual availability. Of course, many Japanese migrants choose Thailand for various motives that are neither financial nor sexual. Nevertheless, to get by with stereotyped retirees who many migrants supposed were living anywhere in Chiang Mai, migrants pervasively practiced anonymous communication.

Since my focus was on how retirees described their general intraethnic community rules, this study did not explore individual cases. But I

argue that the interactive rules are generally less applicable to female retirees because females are not considered sexual exploiters. Also, the scammers who cause distrust<sup>2)</sup> are normally considered male. Nevertheless, women are still subject to anonymous practices because the displaced Japanese include females. By closely examining individual cases of interactions between retiree migrants, as well as between retiree migrants and younger Japanese ones such as working migrants, knowledge will be enriched about imaginings and intraethnic dynamism. This is the next domain to explore.

Besides, the retiree Japanese community in Chiang Mai itself seems to have undergone a change since the first research of the year 2012–2013. In the follow-up interview in 2019, Ms. Kojima, who identified herself as an economic refugee and migrated in 2011, described how the community has transformed over time. In her eyes, many oldcomer retirees in the middle class returned to Japan due to their physical decline. Accordingly, she said that the retiree community constitutes more and more migrants on the margin who lack enough resources to return to Japan. Her view is on the ground that Chiang Mai faces an increasingly problematic situation where frail Japanese migrants without sufficient economic and social capital die alone there. The Japan Times covers the solitary death phenomenon in Chiang Mai. The seriousness pushed the Japanese Consulate General in the city to take action to make house calls to support retirees living alone who might need some help (Masui 2017). In this context, Ms. Kojima and an ailing female retiree who was widowed and had no home in Japan began everyday communication via a smartphone application to ensure if the widow was alive. Culturally-shared imaginings of place are interlinked

to reality even though they are not necessarily a reflection of reality (O'Reilly 2014). Therefore, imaginings of place are open to the possibility of transformation that may invite a change in how migrants identify themselves and others (Salazar 2010: 56). Imaginings of “who are retiree Japanese migrants” possibly change in accordance with the shift in imaginings of Chiang Mai from lifestyle matters to life-and-death matters. Consequently, another basic intraethnic landscape may be emerging. The research update is necessary.

Finally, the interactions developed through imaginings in the Japanese community in Chiang Mai are distinctive but not exceptional. Osbaldiston's research (2015) shows that lifestyle migrants from other nations also speculate about who are attracted to a particular lifestyle in a certain destination, and occupy the majority of a migrant community. The speculation is directly reflected in how migrants relate to other ethnic migrants in the destination. Hopefully, the perspective discussed in this study, i.e., the collective imaginings of ethnic members, helps us better understand the reality within other lifestyle migrant communities.

## Notes

- 1) Japanese lifestyle migration in this study is an inclusive concept of retirement migration. As will be discussed later, although my informants' primary motives for retirement migration differed from person to person, they shared a pre-migration expectation that migration would provide them with a more desirable lifestyle than in Japan. Given the core of the conceptual definition of lifestyle migration, the mobility of Japanese retirees to Chiang Mai can be placed within the form of lifestyle migration.
- 2) As Taylor (2002) connotes that trust contributes to expanding and reinforcing intra-community ties, distrust-based communication itself would not strengthen the ties within Japanese community.

Nevertheless, I expect vibrant interactions will continue in the future, mainly due to the language barrier against other nationals.

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## Appendix

	Name (pseudonym)	Age	Years of stay	Marital status	Occupation	Primary motive for migration
1	Mr. Aoi	63	3	Married with Japanese (migrate alone)	Middle school teacher	Volunteer work
2	Mr. Ayabe	68	1.5	Married with Japanese	Civil servant	Volunteer work
3	Mr. Harada	70	5	Married with Thai	Cafe manager	Financial security
4	Mr. Higashi	65	6	Married with Ms. Higashi	Employee at electronics company	Amenity seeking
5	Mr. Ikeda	65	6	Single	Unclear	Amenity seeking
6	Mr. Iwasa	71	10	Married with Ms. Iwasa	Employee at pharmacy store	Financial security
7	Mr. Miura	72	2	Widow	Owner of a family-run construction company	Financial security
8	Mr. Nakamura	70	1	Widow	Employee at pharmaceutical company	Amenity seeking
9	Mr. Ohe	63	4	Married with Ms. Ohe	Employee at construction company	Amenity seeking
10	Mr. Ohta	65	4	Widow	Civil servant	Amenity seeking
11	Mr. Sakamoto	63	1	Married with Ms. Sakamoto	Self-employed vendor	Financial security
12	Mr. Sato	67	6	Single	Unclear	Tropical climate
13	Mr. Shimoda	63	3	Single	Construction worker	Financial security
14	Mr. Takahashi	74	10	Single	Fisherman	No attachment to Japan
15	Mr. Takeda	72	5	Married with Japanese (migrate alone)	Manager at supermarket	Amenity seeking
16	Mr. Taki	63	14	Married with Japanese (migrate alone)	Owner of a food delivery company	Amenity seeking
17	Mr. Tsukada	69	8	Married with Thai	Cleaner	Financial security
18	Mr. Yamada	58	3	Single	Self-employed photographer	Financial security
19	Mr. Yamaguchi	77	8	Married with Thai	Employee at pharmaceutical company	Seek a Thai partner
20	Mr. Yazawa	64	8	Married with Thai	Employee at telecommunication company	Seek a Thai partner
21	Ms. Higashi	66	6	Married with Mr. Higashi	Housewife	Amenity seeking
22	Ms. Imai	71	4	Widow	Housewife	Amenity seeking
23	Ms. Iwasa	70	10	Married with Mr. Iwasa	Employee at pharmacy store	Financial security
24	Ms. Kawamoto	77	9	Widow	High school teacher	Amenity seeking
25	Ms. Kojima	61	1	Single	Self-employed decorator	Financial security
26	Ms. Nakano	72	7	Married with Japanese	Civil servant	Volunteer work
27	Ms. Nakase	62	4	Single	Employee at publisher	Amenity seeking
28	Ms. Ohe	61	4	Married with Mr. Ohe	Housewife	Amenity seeking
29	Ms. Sakamoto	62	1	Married with Mr. Sakamoto	Self-employed fortuneteller	Amenity seeking
30	Ms. Sasaki	79	5	Widow	Housewife	Tropical climate
31	Ms. Tamaki	73	1	Widow	Housewife	Amenity seeking
32	Ms. Ueda	Unclear (looks in her late 60s)	7	Married with Japanese	Housewife	Tropical climate

\*Follow-up interview in 2019 are with informant 9, 24, 25

\*Residents of researched apartment are informant 11, 16, 24, 29