

เจ้าของธุรกิจคนไทยในสเปนและกลยุทธ์การใช้ความเป็นต่างชาติ Thai Business Owners in Spain and the Strategic Use of Their Foreignness

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บทความนี้ศึกษาธุรกิจชาติพันธุ์ของเจ้าของธุรกิจคนไทยในสเปน โดยใช้การสัมภาษณ์กับเจ้าของร้านอาหารไทยและร้านนวดไทยเป็นหลัก อีกทั้งยังมีการใช้ข้อมูลการสัมภาษณ์กับพนักงานในธุรกิจเหล่านั้นรวมถึงคนไทยในชุมชน ผู้วิจัยค้นพบว่าเจ้าของธุรกิจคนไทยในสเปนเชิดชูสถานะ “ความเป็นต่างชาติ” เพื่อความสำเร็จในการทำธุรกิจซึ่งตรงกันข้ามกับผลงานวิจัยในอดีต เจ้าของธุรกิจคนไทยเลือกสร้างและแสดงความเป็นไทยแท้และละทิ้งประโยชน์ที่ได้จากความเป็นกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ โดยใช้สามกลยุทธ์ดังนี้ 1) ส่งเสริมความเป็นชาตินิยม 2) การจ้างงานคนชาติเดียวกัน และ 3) การใช้ของตกแต่งไทย บทความนี้มีประโยชน์อย่างมากในการเข้าใจเรื่องเชื้อชาติ เผ่าพันธุ์ และการอพยพย้ายถิ่นเนื่องจากทำให้เห็นว่ากลุ่มชาติพันธุ์สามารถได้รับประโยชน์จาก “ความเป็นต่างชาติ” ซึ่งโดยปกติจะถูกใช้เป็นกลไกในการแบ่งแยกผู้อพยพออกจากสังคมหลัก

คำสำคัญ: คนอพยพเชื้อชาติไทย, ธุรกิจไทย, ความดั้งเดิม, การกำหนดความแตกต่าง, สเปน

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Abstract

This article examines ethnic entrepreneurship of Thai business owners in Spain. This article draws primarily from interviews with Thai restaurant owners and massage business owners and is supplemented with interviews with employees and other Thais in the community. Contrary to the literature, this article finds that Thai business owners embrace their status as “foreigners” to succeed in the market by socially constructing and performing Thai authenticity and forego the benefits that derive from panethnicity. They do this in three strategic ways: 1) promote ethnic nationalism 2) hire co-ethnics and 3) use Thai décor. This article has major implications for our current understanding of race, ethnicity, and migration as it shows that ethnic groups can benefit from the idea of “foreignness” which is often used as a mechanism for immigrant exclusion.

Keywords: *Thai immigrant, Thai businesses, Authenticity, Boundary work, Spain*

Introduction

With a great increase in numbers of immigrants, from less than one million in 2000 to over 5.7 million in 2011 (Lopez-Sala. 2013), Spain, unlike other European countries, does not have significant repercussion against immigration. This holds true even with the economic crisis in 2008. Several factors explain why this is the case. First, the Spanish government has a strong commitment to immigrant integration. This is seen through the country’s various policies, the “Plan for Citizenship and Integration” (PECI), for instance. Second, after the end of Franco dictatorship, public statements that undermine democratic values of equality and liberty are discouraged. Pro-immigration groups are large, active, and vocal. Further, because Spain labor market is highly segregated, immigrants are seen as a labor market requirement to fill low or semi-skilled jobs (Arango. 2013).

In general, immigrants are welcomed and immigrant businesses are supported by both the Spain government and the overall public. Migrants currently contribute actively to the formation of new businesses in Spain. The proportion of self-employed immigrants from 2007 to 2008 was almost twice as much as the natives’ (Desiderio and Mestres-Domènech. 2011). Ethnic entrepreneurs offer exotic goods and services of their home countries, contributing to the cosmopolitanism of large cities in Spain (Cebrian. 2009). Chinese immigrants, for instance, are engaged in various businesses throughout Spain from Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, to textile factories and construction companies (Wladyka and Moren-Alegret. 2015). African immigrants’ businesses are as diverse as the Chinese. They are engaged for example in beauty shops, jewelry, and spices (Mababu. 2014). These businesses cater to both coethnics

and other locals. Chinese and African immigrants are immigrants with a large presence in Spain society, their dense networks enable their business operations. This also lets them expand their businesses to more diverse sectors than smaller immigrant groups such as Thai immigrants.

Nevertheless, with a Thai population of only six hundred in Spain (Department of European Affairs. 2017), the multicultural elements of Spanish society allow Thai food and Thai massage to be made known to the local population. This article focuses on the market strategy of Thai business owners. How do they cultivate a clientele in the marketing of a foreign product? To address this question, I analyze the construction of “Thai culture” as an ethnic product, focusing on the production of food and massages as authentically Thai products.

This article responds to the call for more exchange between migration scholars and cultural sociologists (Levitt. 2005). It contributes to studies on ethno-racial boundaries and immigration (Lan. 2003; Smith. 2005). I bridge immigration studies and cultural sociology by illustrating how Thai business owners foreground their “foreignness” to market the ethnic product of Thai food and Thai massage as authentically Thai. They primarily do so by promoting ethnic nationalism, hiring coethnics and using distinctive Thai décor at their establishments. In doing so, they establish their space as not only distinct from dominant Spanish society but also other Asian ethnic groups. This is made possible by the embracement of multiculturalism of the Spanish society.

Theoretical Background

Currently, immigrant entrepreneurship literature examines how immigrant entrepreneurs survive and thrive in the host society. The earliest literature on immigrant entrepreneurship examined the structures that encourage ethnic entrepreneurship. These structural barriers include racial exclusion and discrimination that prevent immigrants from competing on an equal basis with native-born in the mainstream economy (Zhou. 2004) as well as immigrants’ unfamiliarity with the host country corporate structure and culture (Lee. 2002). Migrants thus turned to business ownership to thwart discrimination (Portes and Zhou. 1995; Zhou. 2004) and negotiate the limited recognition of their skills acquired in the country of origin (Mata and Pendakur. 1999). Immigrants open businesses in diverse sectors yet the existing social networks lead particular ethnic groups to certain businesses (e.g. Filipinos in caregiving businesses (Nazareno, 2015); and Indians in motel businesses (Dhingra. 2012). Thai immigrants too are concentrated in two businesses: Thai restaurants and Thai massages.

Kim (1999) discusses how Asian Americans are racially triangulated in relation to Blacks and Whites and as part of the process, Asian Americans are constructed as

permanently foreign and unassimilable. Being viewed as a “perpetual foreigner” has negative implications for Asian American lives in various spheres e.g. daily interactions, works, and politics (Wu. 2003). Thai business owners in Spain too are forever being perceived as foreign, despite the length of time they have spent in the country.

Numerous scholars (e.g. Espiritu. 1993; Okamoto. 2014) highlight the benefits of panethnicity which allow its members to reap greater benefits, especially in a political context. Asian Americans learned that by cooperating with each other they are more likely to succeed in protecting the rights and interests of all Asian American groups, including those that are less prominent. Therefore, panethnicity should be expected to be valued highly among Thais in Spain. However, panethnicity works differently in market transactions. Dávila (2012), for instance, questions the homogeneity of Latino consumers and shows that Latinos debate their social identities through the market. Building from her work, I add another dimension to this literature and show that uniqueness is more important in Thai ethnic businesses. Thai business owners in Spain draw a clear boundary of what is authentic Thai and show that they are different from other business owners who offer similar services.

Boundary work is a process of developing a sense of group membership by which people foster differences among groups through inclusion and exclusion. During this process, similarities and differences within and between groups are constructed or drawn (Lamont and Molnár. 2002). Doing so, one group distinguishes oneself from others (Bartkowski and Read. 2003; Lamont and Fournier. 1992). Groups are thus socially constructed in relation to one another (Barth. 1998). These boundaries are sometimes permeable, yet other times rigid (Eriksen. 2010). Thai business owners draw a clear boundary between themselves and other immigrant businesses by using “ethnic nationalism.” Operators of authentic Thai services must have a shared heritage, which includes a common language, faith, and ethnic ancestry (Muller, 2008). Usually, boundary drawing occurs when the majority group draw boundary against the minority group (e.g. Phelps *et al.* 2012; Sohoni and Mendez. 2014), yet the opposite is also true (e.g. Lan. 2003; Sherman. 2005). My study contributes to the latter. I situate my study in the “symbolic boundaries” literature- conceptual distinctions that individual use to categorize people - and show that Thai, though a minority in the Spanish society, utilize boundary drawing to explain how they are unique, authentic, and different from other Asian groups within Spain society, especially Chinese. Thai business owners in Spain uphold their cultural differences from other immigrant groups and remain concentrated in Thai restaurants and Thai massages, which sell Thai material culture. Because business owners can manipulate consumers into buying certain product or service by emphasizing the meanings, symbols, and images that make such product

or service appealing to different demographic groups (Wherry, 2012), Thai business owners recognize consumers' desire for authentic Thai food and massage and make the services as authentic as possible.

Building from Kim's argument of perpetual foreigner (1999), Espiritu (1993) and Okamoto (2014) discussion of panethnicity, Lamont and Fournier work (1992) of boundary work, and Wherry's discussion of consumer manipulation (2012), I examine how Thai business owners use their "foreignness" and "Thainess" for capital gain via their services. Thai business owners manage impressions that outsiders have of Thai services by constructing and promoting Thai services in terms of authenticity and exoticism. Thai business owners draw boundaries of what is considered "authentic" Thai food and Thai massage for their business prosperity.

Data and Methods

This article is based primarily on semi-structured interviews with nine Thai business owners in Barcelona and Madrid in 2015.² Spain is a relatively new destination for Thai immigrants, hosting approximately six hundred Thais (Department of European Affairs. 2017). According to the Royal Thai Embassy in Spain in 2015, there were only twenty-one Thai restaurants in Barcelona and Madrid, eight of which are owned by Thai people. There were seventeen Thai massage businesses, ten belonged to Thai people.

I found my research participants through email and phone inquiries, along with personal contacts. To diversify the sample, I selected four restaurant owners and five massage business owners from different neighborhoods in two locales: Barcelona and Madrid. The interviews included questions on business owners' migration histories, motivations for opening an ethnic business, business operations, employment processes, perceptions of gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace, strategies of market competitions, and future plans. The interviews on average lasted for one hour. The interviews usually took place at the respondent's business establishment, or in a public setting (e.g. a mall and a café). All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Most of the interviews were conducted fully in Thai, except in cases where Spanish spouses were present, English is then used as deemed appropriate. Tours of restaurants and massage places were common. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. I utilized ATLAS.ti in organizing my interview data and code them into different themes using grounded theory.

²This study has been approved by USC Institutional Review Board (Study ID: UP-14-00700).

Nine business owners whom I interviewed are Thais. Before coming to Spain, all except one massage business owner worked as a massage therapist at famous massage and spa places. The restaurant owners' work history is more diverse. Only one was a chef prior to coming to Spain, others worked for the government or in private sectors. Before becoming business owners, five migrated to Spain on work visas.³ They were hired by Spanish business owners who operate the first Thai restaurant and the first Thai massage place.⁴ All the Thai business owners I interviewed opened their business after 2006. Most opened their businesses during and after the economic crisis. This is another evidence of the openness of Spain society to immigrants' opportunities.

All the massage business owners are women. In the restaurant enterprise, the gender distribution is equally distributed. The respondents' age averages at forty years old, and most are married. Six out of nine businesses are family-owned, many owners' spouses work in the family business though they may play secondary roles. Thai business owners' education level ranges from primary education to professional degrees, yet most have a college degree. Thai business owners have been in Spain for an average of twelve years and most speak good Spanish if not fluent. Five business owners are still holding a work visa, three have become either a permanent resident or a citizen and one is holding a spousal visa. Business scales range from small family-owned businesses, which hires two workers, to mid-sized corporations with over ten employees.

I also supplemented my research with participant observation and took detailed field notes when I attended Thai gatherings; for example, a Thai festival organized by Thailand Department of International Trade Promotion. I also went to local festivals with local Thais (e.g. Madrid Gay Pride) and have lunch and dinner at their houses and local restaurants. Doing so, I observed, interacted, and engaged with people in the Thai community and had many conversations and in some cases interviews with the

³My study on Thai entrepreneurs in Spain is unique as most Thais came to Spain on work visas and once an opportunity arose they switched to ethnic entrepreneurship. This is different from previous studies on Thai migration to European countries which focus on Thai women marriage migrants e.g. Netherland (Suksomboon, 2008), Sweden (Webster and Haandrikman, 2016), and the United Kingdom (Sims, 2012).

⁴Thai businesses in Spain are quite recent. The first Thai restaurant was established in 1998 and the first Thai massage place was established approximately in 2003. Both businesses were large-size businesses and were opened in Madrid by Spanish capitalists, yet a Thai person did hold some stocks. These two businesses marked the start of Thai businesses in Spain. Many Thai restaurant owners used to work as chefs at this first Thai restaurant and many massage business owners were massage therapists at this massage place.

workers (e.g. chefs, therapists, managers, administrative assistants) and Thai businessmen in other sectors, food import, for instance.

That I am Thai shaped my rapport with the respondents. The shared racial and social status also facilitated a level of comfort as respondents can openly discuss their business situations, the problems they face in operating their business, and even business strategies they use to compete with their fellow coethnics. Several limitations are acknowledged. First, as the sample is Thai business owners who voluntarily agreed to an interview, there may be selection bias. For example, it could be that these business owners treat their workers better than the average employers, and these owners obey the law and do not offer sex-related acts on their premises. Further, because my analysis is drawn only from Thai business owners who are Thai I cannot determine whether they are more or less successful than non-Thai who owned Thai businesses.

Results

Thai business owners manufacture and market authentic Thai cultural services via three central strategies: 1) promote ethnic nationalism 2) hire coethnics and 3) use Thai décor.

1. Ethnic Nationalism

In the selling of food and massages, Thai business owners claim their authenticity against non-coethnic business owners by upholding their services as uniquely Thai. They do this by claiming to staunchly abide by traditional practice, one they assert would be tainted and made inauthentic by a performance of a non-Thai.

The importance of knowledge and skills required of therapists and chefs is prominent. Ploen, a massage and spa owner in her 40s, traveled for several years around Thailand to take courses with famous alternative and village doctors. Many at well-known establishments (e.g. Shivagakomarpaj Institute in Chiang Mai). Doing so, she claimed to not just learn massage and orthopedic, but also how to cultivate the mind. Further, to master this profession requires time and there is no shortcut. Jane, a massage business owner in her late 30s who has been in Spain for twelve years claims:

“Working in this profession requires a lot of time. It’s not like you can learn how to do things in one day...one week...one month you still can’t. One year is still like an amateur.”

Like their massage business owner counterparts, those in the restaurant business also underscored the importance of knowledge, experience, and skills. A Thai chef in his mid-30s explained that there are only two “real” Thai chefs in Spain (him and another person). The rest, according to him, “were trained quickly in the kitchen and went out to work for Thai restaurants.” He is proud of his profession and is not hesitant to let me know that he had worked at numerous famous places in Thailand. He told me how he had to work hard to become one. Here, the chef engages in boundary drawing as by identifying what the other is, he is identifying himself. The identity construction is both relational and contextual. It is relational as identity construction engages in the othering process which assumes a relationship of one identity to another and contextual as the context in which the process occurs, shapes meanings, expectations, and roles that certain identities carry (Adib and Guerrier. 2003). The other “real” chef whom he was referring to is now a restaurant owner. Once asked what he did before coming to Spain, he explains, “I was a chef all along...I’ve been working since I was 12...I gained those experiences so till now it should be 30 years.” (Tik, restaurant owner, 40s, in Spain thirteen years)

Thai business owners use boundary drawing as an important tool to display Thai authenticity and define what they are not. Many Thai business owners are protective of their national identity and business genuineness. They are furious when people of other nationalities make false claims to be Thai for business purposes, either through the business name or in person. Take for instance, Mint, a massage and spa owner in her 30s who has lived in Spain for six years: “Many Chinese places have the word “Thai” in the business name. There is a big place, it doesn’t belong to a Thai person but they use a Thai name because it attracts more customers. If they say it’s a Chinese place, no one will go.” Mint then explains that some places even go as far as to mislead the customers. “Filipinos look like us, so if customers ask for a Thai therapist, the owners will offer Filipinos because they look like us. Chinese, Japanese are unlike us, customers can tell. But Filipinos they look like us.”

Anger is heightened in cases where non-Thai owners claim to be Thai and provide sexual services as it devalues Thai massage to that of sex instead of ancient healing therapy. “Many Chinese open a massage parlor and claim to be Thai. They charge a cheap price and sometimes provide sexual services.” (Ploen) Indeed, Ploy, a massage business owner in her 30s who lived four years in Spain explains her experience working at a Chinese place as:

When I was working there, I met an unpleasant customer. I resigned and opened my own place...I was new here [in Spain] and I didn’t know...I didn’t know the owner’s intention of the spa. I really didn’t know at that time. There are different

kinds of massage, and I didn't even know what Tantra massage was. So this place has it, and I didn't know what it was...Tantra massage is massaging on the belly to treat men who have a problem in having an orgasm. So, that's what it is but I didn't know then... When I encountered that customer I got into a fight with the owner and my colleagues. I asked them why they have this kind of customers. Why wasn't I informed?

All Thai massage business owners emphasize their non-engagement in sexual services and thus try to differentiate themselves from Chinese places which they view as tainting Thai massage reputation.

I was exhausted, especially in the first two years. But for the third and the fourth year, especially our regular customers, they will know that our place doesn't have sex service. But if it's during the summer, when the customers are tourists from other places I will sometimes get into a fight with them...We just do the massage and when it finishes, it finishes. Some customers will ask at the end. Like are there no extra service? I will tell them that they come to the wrong place we don't have such service. (Mint)

The urge to differentiate against non-Thai Thai restaurant owners is also common. Tik, a restaurant owner, explained his strategies to determine which place is authentically Thai:

“If I go to a Thai restaurant I would write the order for the chefs in Thai...If the chefs can't cook it because they can't read Thai that means the place doesn't have a Thai chef. So I will get unauthentic food. Non-Thais perceive Thai food as being able to sell so they keep opening Thai restaurants. Sometimes it's Chinese people...so the food doesn't taste Thai.”

Thai entrepreneurs thus do not see the value of panethnicity; instead, they devalue it and draw boundaries between themselves and other Asian groups, especially from Chinese businesses as they are more likely to operate similar businesses. Thai business owners engage in “ethnic nationalism,” by asserting that Thainess is premised on a shared heritage, language, and culture that is unchanging and traditional. This then explains why Thai business owners view that it is important to hire coethnics whenever possible.

2. Coethnic Employment

Thai workers are utilized to persuade the authenticity of the businesses. This is especially true in the front arena. Goffman (1959) divides the social world into front and back regions. Front regions are where social actors perform in front of the audience. Back regions, on the other hand, are prohibited to outsiders as back regions are where

social actors prepare their performances and relax in between performances. MacCannell (1976) states that a true back region is not available to tourists, but as the travel industry understands modern tourists' desire for authenticity, staged authenticity is created. A front region may be presented as if it were a back region for tourists (Molz. 2004). This point is shown clearly in an interview with a Spanish restaurant manager in his 30s, who manages a Thai restaurant that hires at least seventy percent non-Thai workers:

“Because when we receive Thai people [sic], it's like a rule for us to have Thai speaking [workers]. If I go to Bangkok to a Spanish restaurant, I would be waiting for someone to speak Spanish with me to demonstrate how authentic you are. So we organize our time with the staff. We have Thai groups on Wednesday, so Thai waiters work on Wednesday.”

Both Thai restaurants and Thai massage places hire a significant number of Thai workers. On average Thai restaurant owners hire Thai staff sixty-three percent and Thai massage business owners hire on average seventy-nine percent Thai workers. Many massage business owners also have a policy of hiring only Thai workers, yet no restaurants hold such a policy. Some business owners' preference for Thai labor is so extreme that it limits their channel of finding new workers and sometimes well-qualified ones. Jane, explains:

It's word of mouth and I also post on Facebook [the job openings] but I never post on my business website because it leads to too many candidates and I have a group that I want. I prefer Thai people. I will not accept non-Thai, otherwise, the Thainess is gone. There will be no trace of the “originality” [authenticity]...I prefer Thai people. It doesn't matter how experienced the foreigners might be when they come and work, we couldn't work with them. It's a different style...I have worked with a foreigner and I had a problem. So even though I don't have enough workers, I would not hire a foreigner.

Once asked if Jane has ever hired a non-Thai she answers, “No, never! Even for the receptionist, I wouldn't accept foreigners. We [Thai] do it ourselves. It is a Thai place. The truth is I want it to be authentic. Because when you come to a Thai business, I want you to get the feeling that everything is Thai, the decoration, the people, the service.” Even when Jane is short-staffed, she insists on hiring only Thai.

Nevertheless, because Spain has a Thai population of merely six hundred (Department of European Affairs. 2017), this leads to Thai labor shortage. Filipino workers, due to their similar physical looks to Thai, are often hired in Thai businesses. Filipinos fluency in Spanish also makes them highly preferred.

3. Thai Décor

To uphold the promise of the authentic experience that customers will get when visiting Thai establishments, both Thai restaurant and Thai massage business owners emphasize the need to decorate their establishments to look Thai to the best of their abilities. The Spanish manager of a Thai restaurant explains:

“The ambient which people really like, to be surrounded by all these orchids and statues...so we are trying to say this is little Thai... We invested a lot of money taking care of the plants [sic], the things on the wall, so everything comes from Thailand. The maintenance of this huge place costs a lot of money. But people like it, so it’s not just the food, it’s where you are eating, the ambiance you have here... the space is unique.”

Most of the Thai business owners import their decors directly from Thailand. Kat, a massage and spa owner in her 40s who resided in Spain for eleven years explained how she brought over the decors for her massage place:

“I imported everything from Thailand...When I first opened this place I sent over one container of décor via ship. After that, I go back to Thailand every year and I bring the décors back with me.”

Though the decoration of Thai businesses varies from one place to another, yet common themes emerge. Both Thai restaurants and massage places have Thai arts displayed on walls (e.g. painting of the Buddha, floating market, and ancient sites) and sacred statues that have important meaning in Thai culture (e.g. Buddha). These statues vary in their make, some are carefully handcrafted woods, carved stone, and others are brass sculptures. Thai orchids are often presented throughout Thai establishments. Some places even have Thai arches to fit into corners of their places and Thai pattern wallpapers. Thai fabrics (e.g. Thai silk and Thai hand-woven fabric) are often used as décor in both Thai restaurants and massage places. Some places have their workers wear traditional Thai dress and have them “wai” customers as they come in. Some owners choose elephant prints on the fabrics to further emphasize Thainess as elephant is the national animal of Thailand.

The equipment used in each Thai establishment is also particularly chosen to reflect Thai culture. Wooden benches in the lobby are carefully hand-crafted with Thai designs and Thai triangle cushions embroidered with Thai patterns are used instead of the regular squared-cushion. Thai restaurants also have unique dining sets (e.g. Thai brass bowls and utensils, Thai rooster bowls, and handcrafted bamboo baskets to store sticky rice). Some places offer carved fruits and vegetables as part of the food décor. Thai massage owners too give emphasis to the equipment that will be used throughout the massage. Often, there is a wooden tray which has hand-painted clay

pots and wooden bowls that carry massage oil and herbs, and some places have Thai herbal balls. All these décors and equipment are unique only to a Thai place. By coming to a Thai business, customers will be intrigued by the ambiance and all the details that go into bringing out the authentic Thai experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the 1990s Spanish government has given tremendous importance to immigrant integration policy. This explains why Spain, unlike other countries in Europe, has fewer difficulties in integrating immigrants from various continents. Spain government integration policy, the pro-immigrant political culture of Spain, and the segregated labor market are prime conditions that allow for the cosmopolitanism of Spanish society. Thai, despite the small population in Spain, took advantage of these conditions and operate Thai restaurants and Thai massage businesses. Their businesses are widely recognized and well-received by the local communities.

In this article, I examined the boundary work that Thai business owners engage in to explain how Thai business owners perceive their services as unique from other ethnic businesses that offer similar services. Thai business owners draw boundaries between themselves and their business competitors by emphasizing their unique and authentic service through 1) ethnic nationalism 2) coethnics hiring and 3) Thai décor. Thai business owners explicitly draw these boundaries to differentiate themselves from business owners whom they deemed as culturally different and nonauthentic. Thai business owners claim their business authenticity which other ethnics (e.g. Chinese) lack due to the different cultural heritage. To operate an authentic Thai business, one must be Thai. By embodying Thai heritage- knowing Thai language, culture and custom, Thai business owners believe they are the only business owners that can operate authentic Thai services. To further reflect their business authenticity, Thai business owners hire coethnics and decorate their establishments with Thai décors.

This article has major implications for our current understanding of race, ethnicity, and migration as it shows that ethnic groups can benefit from the idea of “foreignness” which is often viewed negatively in association to an immigrant life, particularly in term of immigrant assimilation. Instead, in this article, I show that Thai business owners intentionally “amplify” their differences to Spain society in general and other Asians within Spain. Success in the market for Thai business owners is rooted in the “foreignness” of their establishments.

This article also furthers our understanding of boundary work within immigrant entrepreneurship. Despite being part of a new and small immigrant group, Thai business owners intentionally distinguish themselves from Asian panethnic group for business

purposes. The uphold of “foreignness” and the downplay of “panethnicity” thus is contrary to the current discussion within the United States which view “foreignness” as a setback to immigrant lives and “panethnicity” as having positive implications for having their voices heard. An advantage in a political arena thus does not always lead to positive results in the market. Culture then is not only a collective practice but is and can be used as a commodity as Thai business owners in Spain has shown. The commodification of ethnicity is embedded in Thai being very distinct from Spanish and others.

Recommendations

Future research can explore whether boundary drawing also occurs with immigrant entrepreneurs who do not sell ethnic goods and services but sell general goods such as greengrocers and clothing. One can even examine whether Thai business owners in other countries draw boundaries the same way their counterparts in Spain do. This analysis also provides a starting point for comparative research on whether the host country’s integration policy has any effects on the ability to operate an ethnic business and the integration of ethnic business owners. This premise could be tested in countries that have different immigrant integration policy. For example, Thai business owners in France and Germany– destinations with low integration policy planning.

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