

# Situated Mixedness

## Understanding Migration-Related Intimate Diversity in Belgium

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## Chapter 8

### Transnationally situated meanings regarding food consumption among Laotian-Belgian couples in Belgium

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# 8 Transnationally situated meanings regarding food consumption among Laotian-Belgian couples in Belgium

*Mimy Keomanichanh*

## Introduction

Mali (57 years old) and Jean (65 years old) welcomed me to their home in Wallonia one Saturday in July 2021.<sup>1</sup> When my interview with them finished around 5 pm, they invited me to stay for dinner. While I was helping Mali prepare the dinner, Jean was working in the garage. Mali had already a dish in mind. “Today, we’re going to have grilled fish (*ping pa*), curcuma salad (*tam mark taeng*), and bamboo soup (*kaeng nor mai*) with sticky rice (*khao niaw*)”, Mali told me. In Laos (Mali’s country of origin), this is considered to be a full and “authentic” Laotian meal.<sup>2</sup> I was grateful to Mali for giving me the opportunity to eat what is known as “Lao food” (*ahan lao*), as the last time I did so was in Laos in March 2020, some 18 months previously. She then told me that I was always welcome to visit her, as she and her husband ate Laotian and other Asian food on a daily basis.<sup>3</sup> By 7 pm, the evening meal was ready. The couple did not have any children, so there were only three of us at the dinner table. While eating, Jean mentioned that he enjoyed eating Lao food and other Asian food before marrying Mali.

The culinary habits of Mali and Jean are unusual among the couples I met as part of my research. Almost all the Laotian participants said they preferred eating Lao food and other Asian food in their everyday life. However, even if they are in charge of food preparation in their household, this does not mean that they only cook food according to their own preferences. Most of the Belgian participants, in contrast, only wanted to eat Asian food some of the time, as they were more attached to European food.<sup>4</sup> Jean was one of the few Belgian participants who was positive about Lao food. Given the complexity of culinary choices in Laotian-Belgian households, in this chapter I address the following questions: how do Laotian spouses manage the different food preferences in their household? How does the gender role related to food in Laos and the socio-economic context of food in Belgium shape the couple’s food practices? How do the couple’s culinary choices demonstrate the dynamics of conjugality?

Given that the partners in these Laotian-Belgian couples grew up in different countries, their food consumption can be best understood by situating them within their transnational life contexts encompassing both Belgium and

Laos. This approach draws from a “situated mixedness” framework that constitutes the theme of this publication (see Fresnoza-Flot, 2025). The framework pays attention to the role of contexts in shaping the agency, experiences, practices, and narratives of couples and/or individual partners who are socially viewed as non-normative. Since dinner is the main meal in the everyday lives of many couples in my study, and a time when they get together, my chapter focuses on their eating habits around dinner. In the following sections, I reveal the contexts that appear to influence the conjugal lives (notably the meanings attached to food practices) of what are known in the literature as “mixed couples”, in other words, partners with different social appearances based on various dimensions, including religion, ethnicity, and nationality (Collet and Unterreiner, 2017).

### **Food practices of “mixed” couples**

Food is considered by many scholars as an expression of people’s cultural<sup>5</sup> (Weller and Turkon, 2015) and national identities (Atsuko and Ranta, 2016). Research has shown that migrants’ food practices represent an interaction between their country of residence and their country of origin (Bailey, 2017). While food in the context of migration has been widely examined, it has been considerably less explored in studies of “mixed” couples.

Food consumption in the country of residence can be considered as a “dietary acculturation”, as it develops migrants’ sense of belonging and socio-national identity (Terragni et al., 2014). Consuming the natal or “heritage food” (Weller and Turkon, 2015) symbolises their cultural origins, nostalgia, and affiliations (Codesal, 2010). As the case of Taiwanese immigrant women in Belgium shows (Lin et al., 2020), they prefer to eat Taiwanese dishes at home and when they meet with their co-ethnocultural acquaintances. Through cooking and eating Taiwanese food, they share their past life stories in Taiwan with their Belgian partners and their children (p. 16).

Food consumption can be an entry point for examining marital and family dynamics. For example, Yang (2010) analyses the food practices of French and Taiwanese couples in Taiwan, which reveals that eating habits are an important element in these partners’ negotiations, due to the socio-cultural differences around meals and table manners in their respective countries of origin. Yang (ibid.) states that “eating is a twofold issue” (p. 10). On the one hand, it can lead to marital breakdown if the couple is unable to reach a compromise on the subject of eating habits. On the other, the French partner may leave Taiwan if they face difficulties integrating into the Taiwanese society. While Yang’s article is based on the marital tension that can be caused by eating habits, the work of Shields-Argelès (2010) on French-American couples shows that partners can express their love for one another through their eating habits. The author shows that American spouses are enthusiastic about discovering French cuisine and voluntarily appropriate it. French cuisine is socially perceived in the United States as healthier and more prestigious, in

comparison with the poor reputation of American food. By adopting French culinary habits, American spouses reconstitute their social status, their sense of connection with French identity. Shields-Argelès (2010) therefore states that “the power of food” can “shape our sense of self as well as our very appetites; impacting in this way not only what we eat and who we are, but also what we desire and who we aspire to be” (p. 15).

Examining the food practices of mixed couples can also reflect the foreign partner’s integration into their partner’s native country and the dynamics of intergenerational transmission within their families. In his study of French-Taiwanese couples, Yang (2013) observed that these couples’ social integration is not only shaped by the interpersonal dynamics within the couple but also by the relationship between the foreign partner and their family-in-law. His work revealed that meals with in-laws are a “conjugal duty” in which the couple is obliged to participate in the in-laws’ family meals. The meals allow the in-laws to express their goodwill towards or rejection of their children’s partners. Regarding the parent-child relationship, the comparative study by Gonzalez Alvarez and Fresnoza-Flot (2020) identified the determinants that shape the transmission of eating practices from parents to children in Peruvian-Belgian and Filipino-Belgian families. In other words, “the economic situation of the partners, the intersection of gender and ethnicity, and the networks forged by the mothers” (p. 41).

This research shows that analysing the food practices of mixed couples can lead to an understanding of their marital, conjugal, and family dynamics. In a similar manner, this chapter aims to reveal the conjugal values of Belgian-Laotians couples based on their daily food choices. The chapter also contributes to the literature on the culinary habits of mixed couples and seeks to highlight the significant impact that the transnational context in which partners live has on couples’ daily lifestyles.

### Meanings of food for Laotian migrant spouses

To identify what shapes the food practices of Laotian-Belgian couples, it is important to understand the meanings of food in Laos, where the wives in my study originated.

The expression *ahan pheuan ban* or *ahan ban na* (literally meaning “village dishes”) refers to indigenous ways of food preparation, often perceived as “real” Laotian dishes. These dishes are usually prepared with local products (Strigler and Le Bihan, 2001, p. 9). A few examples of common Laotian dishes include soups (*keang*), vegetables, fish, or meat cooked in water (*tôm*), chilli and herb-based sauce (*tcheo*), stewed fish or meat (*oe*) or banana leaves (*mok*), savoury salad (*tam sôm*), and vegetable salad (*soup*) seasoned with *padaek*, *lap* and *koy*, dishes of minced meat or fish, raw or cooked, with chilli and herbs, and last but not least, grilled dishes (*ping*) of fish, meat, frogs, or crabs.<sup>6</sup> (*ibid.*, p. 11). *Padaek* is an important part of many Laotian dishes. This is a fish sauce made from fermented fish:

the fish is scaled, gutted and washed, before being left to soak overnight in salted water. One day after that the fish is mixed with rice bran, which prevents the mixture from becoming rancid. The sauce is preserved in a jar throughout the year; the *padaek* can be eaten after a month.

(*ibid.*, p. 9)

These Laotian dishes are mainly served with sticky steamed rice (*khao niaw*) and can be served as a breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

As Laos is a “country in transition”, the lifestyle between urban and rural areas is highly differentiated, including people’s eating habits (Strigler, 2008, p. 23). In addition to traditional Laotian dishes, many other popular Asian meals are consumed in urban areas, including Vietnamese cuisine such as spring rolls (*yor khao*) and noodles salad (*bor bun*), Chinese dishes such as noodle soups (*mii leuang*) and Peking chicken or duck, and Thai dishes such as stir-fried rice (*khao phat*) and stir-fried noodles (*phat sen*). The consumption of these meals can be attributed to the important historical ties between Laos and its neighbouring countries. People from Vietnam and China, for example, have been living in Laos since the French colonisation of urban areas (Rossetti, 1997, p. 27). Meanwhile, socio-economic exchanges between Laos and Thailand are partly due to the similarities between the Lao and Thai languages. Thailand is also a major destination not only for unskilled Laotian migrant workers (Khouangvichit, 2010) but also for middle- and upper-class Laotians seeking quality medical services (Bochaton, 2015).

Laos was officially declared a communist regime in 1975 and kept its borders closed until the 1990s. The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) then progressively opened its economy to the international market (Rigg, 2005). The country has welcomed foreign investments from big companies and smaller ones like coffee shops. Urban areas, including the capital Vientiane, are known for many restaurants offering meals from different countries (Strigler, 2019). Coffee shops offer a variety of coffee-based drinks including Americano, cappuccino, and latte, as well as pastries such as croissants, pains au chocolat, and other non-Laotian desserts. These cafés are not always managed by foreigners and middle-class and upper-class Laotians also own and/or manage such shops. The customers often have a similar profile to the shop owners, being migrants or tourists from foreign countries and middle-class and upper-class Laotians. As a result of the economic growth in the urban areas of Laos, individual food consumption patterns in the country can reflect social status. For example, it is common for Laotians to joke that eating spicy *padaek* sauce (*cheo*) is practiced by people from the lower classes (*loso*) and eating *falang* food<sup>7</sup> is socially associated with the upper class (*biso*).

According to his ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in rural villages in northern Laos, Ponce (2022a) observed that food mediates social interactions and hierarchical power structures. On the one hand, food works as a

“medium” that characterises a broad range of interpersonal relationships. On the other, food serves as an intermediary between humans and religious spirits. Additionally, rural villagers prepare food as a means of appeasing the state authorities, while simultaneously employing the metaphor of consumption to critique these authorities for corruption. Ponce (2022b) further postulates that post-socialist economic reforms significantly impact the livelihoods of these rural populations. The resettlement of rural villages in northern Laos, driven by hydropower projects, is one result of these reforms which has led to changes in the villagers’ lifestyles and food practices. Ponce (2022a) also underscores the failures of these resettlement projects in terms of villagers’ food security. The villagers experience food scarcity due to the lack of (predominantly natural) food sources, which were sufficiently present around their former villages.

Another meaning of food in Laos is connected to this country’s gender norms. Whether in urban or rural areas, it has been noted that the traditional ideology on gender roles within a couple in Laos involves the wife being in charge of household chores, including cooking (Khouangvichit, 2010, p. 141). Women are often advised to be good cooks before marrying, as this is a necessary skill for a stable marriage and a good household. Within the ideology of the model wife who undertakes chores and prepares food for the family, a social discourse related to food takes place within couples’ interactions. The wife is expected to be attractive for her husband and food should play a similar role, meaning that the husband should not only be attracted to his wife but also to the food she prepares. Later, in the empirical sections of this chapter, we will see how this gender ideology shapes the food choices of the Laotian-Belgian couples in my study.

### **Minority immigrant populations and entrepreneurship in Belgium**

To further understand the rationale behind the food practices of Laotian-Belgian couples, it is crucial to understand the context within which they live. Contemporary Belgium can be described as an “ethnic” society (Bastienier, 2004) in the sense that it encompasses diverse immigrant populations from around the world.

Immigrant populations in Belgium can be categorised in several ways. The first takes a historical point of view to “old” immigrants and “new” immigrants (Van Der Bracht et al., 2014). Belgium has been a host country for immigrants since the end of World War II. Significant immigration at that time involved labour migrants from Southern Europe, North Africa, and then Turkey (*ibid.*, p. 73). Chinese immigrants also arrived in Antwerp between the 1930s and 1950s (Van Dongen, 2019, p. 2571), as well as people from Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos) who arrived in large numbers in the 1970s and 1980s as political refugees following the end of the Vietnam War (Bun and Christie, 1995). Several generations of their descendants have since been born in Belgium. Since the 1990s, a new wave of immigration

has been taking place (Van Der Bracht et al., 2014, p. 73), with migrants from Eastern and Central Europe such as Poles, Romanians, and Bulgarians, as well as from countries in Central Africa and Latin America (Martiniello et al., 2013, p. 8). From the 2000s onwards, the migration of women to Belgium became more visible (Martiniello and Rea, 2012, p. 36). The second way of categorising the immigrant populations in Belgium is to use the terms “majority” and “minority” or “ethnic” groups (Bastenier, 2004). This designation is determined by both the immigrants’ country of origin and their religious affiliation. “Minority” or “ethnic” immigrant populations mainly refer to people from countries outside the European Union who are affiliated (or their predecessors were affiliated) with a non-Christian religion (Cerchiaro, 2022).

Both “old” and “new” minority immigrants face discrimination in the Belgian labour market. As highlighted in the article by Van Der Bracht and colleagues (2014), “labour market outcomes are similarly disadvantageous: unemployment is high and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in precarious jobs on the secondary labour market. Generally speaking, these jobs have low wages, offer limited mobility and training opportunities, as well as unhealthy and monotonous working conditions” (p. 74). By mobilising “ethnic resources” (Pécoud, 2012, p. 3) and/or “ethnic social capital” (Nicholls, 2012), minority immigrants tend to opt for self-entrepreneurship in order to avoid socio-economic deprivation and ethnic discrimination in the labour market. Social science research refers to this economic activity as “immigrant” or “ethnic” entrepreneurship (Rath and Swagerman, 2016). This notion is based on the fact that these businesses are owned by people from minority immigrant populations, and most of their employees and customers also come from co-ethnic groups or other minority populations (Pécoud, 2012, p. 7). This economy stems from and at the same time boosts “co-ethnic and interethnic minority solidarity” (Nicholls, 2012, 2015). The economic activities of minority immigrants in Belgium cover all types and levels of trade. For example, there are transnational import-export enterprises between Belgium and the immigrants’ countries of origin, such as textiles, agricultural products, diamonds, and food (Martiniello and Bousetta, 2008), as well as small immigrant-owned shops (Van Dongen, 2019). Since my chapter examines food practices, I have investigated the context of immigrant food shops, more specifically shops for Asian products. This specific economic activity (Asian product shops) has a direct influence on the culinary practices of Laotian-Belgian households.

According to Nicholls (2015), Asian food products (spices, herbs, etc.) in Belgium are imported mainly from China, Hong Kong, and other South-East Asian countries (p. 158). These shops are mostly found in large cities where immigrant populations are concentrated (Van Der Bracht et al., 2014, p. 74). In Antwerp, for example, there is a neighbourhood known as China Town, where a large number of shops selling Asian products can be found. These shops are owned by Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, and Filipino immigrants,

among others. In Brussels, the largest Asian supermarket is located in the city centre and is owned by a Chinese family. It opened under the name Sun Wah in 1985 and changed its name to KamYuen in 2002 (Nicholls, 2015, p. 159). There are numerous small supermarkets all over Brussels as well as in other Belgian cities (Verstraete, 2011). More and more exotic products can also be found in supermarket chains such as Colruyt, Delhaize, and Carrefour, which may indicate a considerable demand for these products in Belgium. There is also a market known as Abattoir which is located in Anderlecht (Brussels), where minority immigrants from different populations can buy immigrant food and household products (Alexander, 2021). This market is only open at the weekends and sells all kinds of goods at low prices. It attracts immigrant customers who are particularly interested in meat-based products which cannot be found in regular supermarkets, such as intestines, pig legs, and pig ears.

### **Methodology and sample**

This chapter examines the experiences of 12 heterosexual couples living in Belgium. I met these couples during my doctoral research which focused on the emotional experiences of partners in Laotian-Belgian relationships. I conducted fieldwork between the spring of 2019 and the summer of 2021. I made contact with the couples by adopting a “snowball” approach in three important meeting places for Laotian migrants in Belgium: the Laotian embassy and the Lao Buddhist temples in Brussels and Liège.

I observed the couple’s interactions in their homes and in public spaces. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with each partner to find out more about their personal experiences. The interviews took place at the couples’ homes. Some of them welcomed me into their home for a whole weekend, and I spent the night there. In short, I adopted “intimate methods” (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022), including sleeping over in the couples’ homes and eating with them. The interviews were conducted in either French or English with the Belgian partners and in the Laotian language with the Laotian partners.

All 12 couples were formed of a Belgian man and a Laotian woman. This form of heterosexual relationship configuration seems common among Western-Asian couples<sup>8</sup> (Angeles and Sunanta, 2007; Constable, 2003; Fresnoza-Flot, 2020; Heyse, 2010). Six couples lived in Wallonia and six others in Flanders. This choice was based on the Belgian partner’s origins. The Laotian spouses hailed from different regions in Laos and had immigrated to Belgium when they were already adults, mostly between the ages of 22 and 40. When I met them, they were between 30 and 60 years old. Eleven out of 12 were employees and another one lived on state benefits. The Belgian participants were between 40 and 65 years old at the time of my interviews and 10 out of the 12 were also employees, while two were retired. Eleven couples had been in a relationship for between 10 and 27 years, while one couple started their relationship in 2020.



### Laotian food as a source of emotional comfort for migrant spouses

My observations and interviews with the Laotian participants indicated that there are three types of food usually consumed in their households. First, they eat spicy Lao food with sticky rice, such as vegetable salad (*soup phak*), meat, fish, or chicken salad (*laab*), spicy sauce (*cheo*), and so on. Second, they prepared other Asian-inspired food, including Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, or Japanese food such as curry soup, sushi, noodle soup, spring rolls, and wok-cooked meals. Finally comes *falang food*, food from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, such as sandwiches, steaks, French fries, processed meat, and pasta.

One of the people I interviewed, Nok (37 years old), told me, “living abroad (in a Western country), eating Lao food (*ahan lao*) is the best thing ever. I don’t want anything else”. She described how she really enjoyed eating Lao food since she moved to Belgium, and felt that she needed it in order to have a fulfilling day. Most of my Laotian participants reported similar experiences. They have faced a number of challenges in their new social spaces, particularly the social stereotype about Asian spouses being involved in marriages of convenience. Participants also experienced loneliness (*ngao*) due to their less active social lives in Belgium compared to their previous life in Laos, surrounded by friends and family. They also attributed the origins of this feeling to the norms of social interaction in Belgium, where privacy (*sivit suan tua*) is highly valued. For instance, many participants indicated that even if neighbours live in close proximity, they do not maintain the close-knit relationships observed in Laotian society. In Belgium, it is considered inappropriate to visit a neighbour, family member, or friend without prior notification. This reflects a form of respect for privacy but, from the perspective of the Laotian participants, it also creates boundaries in social relationships. Participants who lived near places where Laotian and Thai<sup>9</sup> populations socialise did not experience loneliness to the same extent. To feel at home means feeling relaxed and Laotian spouses construct their transnational lives by maintaining the socio-cultural lifestyles from their country of origin. For example, they listen to Laotian or Thai music<sup>10</sup> through social media. YouTube and Facebook give them an opportunity to show their migrant life to their friends and family in Laos and allow them keep up to date with what is happening in their country of origin. Similarly, consuming Lao food gives them the feeling of being at home.

For the Laotian participants in my study, Lao food is their “comfort food” because its “consumption provides consolation or a feeling of well-being ... that offers some sort of psychological, specifically emotional comfort” (Spence, 2017, p. 105). Pimai (32 years old) shared her thoughts with me on how Lao food gives her a positive feeling:

*Question:* What food do you eat on a day-to-day basis?

*Pimai:* I eat Lao food, but in the past, I only ate wok-cooked meals.<sup>11</sup> My husband can eat this kind of food.

*Question:* Do you eat *falang* food?

*Pimai:* Not often. Last week we were on holiday in Italy. I almost died without Lao food for a whole week. We were looking for an Asian restaurant but couldn't find one. Afterwards, I found a Korean supermarket where I bought *kimchi*<sup>12</sup> and spicy noodles. This experience reminded me of when I arrived in Belgium and tried to survive without Lao food. At that time, I didn't have many social connections and didn't know where to find Asian supermarkets. I forced myself to eat *falang* food with my husband. Once I was able to find Asian ingredients in Belgium, I stopped eating *falang* food. Since then, I cook Lao or Asian food for myself. During my holiday in Italy, I had the same feeling as when I first came to Belgium. A whole week is quite hard without spicy food. The spicy Korean noodles saved my life!

Pimai met her Belgian partner, Jonas (40 years old), in Laos in 2009. After their first meeting, Jonas travelled to Laos once a year for three years (in other words, three journeys) to see Pimai. In 2012, it was Pimai's turn to join Jonas in Belgium. This voyage was also her first time travelling to a Western country. She came on a tourist visa, which allowed her to stay in Belgium for three months. The couple got married in order to permanently extend Pimai's legal stay in Belgium.

Pimai's case echoes the situation of most of the Laotian participants in my study, who prefer Lao food as their main dish on a daily basis. Having lived for ten years in Belgium, Pimai still turns to Lao food for emotional comfort. Connecting her experience of a holiday in Italy without Lao (or Asian) food to her first years in Belgium, she recognised the same feelings. "I almost died" (*keuap taiy*) or "try to survive" (*lord sivit*) are the expressions that she used to describe the difficulties she experienced when she did not have her comfort food. Based on her narrative, it is the element of spice that appears to be the most important aspect of her comfort food. *Kimchi* (a Korean specialty, commonly served as a side dish) can act as a good substitute for her Lao food because of its spiciness and sourness. It has a similar taste to some Lao food, such as *somphak* (fermented vegetables). This preference can explain why Pimai and many other Laotian participants do not often eat *falang* food, as they do not consider it tasty (spicy) and energising (*mihaeng*).

Pimai's story also reveals a transition in her choice of food. After discovering a shop that sold Asian food products, she stopped eating European meals on a daily basis. This demonstrates that the presence of such shops facilitates access to Asian food products, which can in turn offer emotional comfort to Pimai when she consumes them.

### **Food as a seduction tool used by Laotian spouses**

While Laotian spouses consider Lao food a source of comfort, most of their Belgian husbands do not share this attitude. A few examples are the

spicy taste and use of *padaek* (fish sauce), something that smells good to the Laotian wife but not to her Belgian husband. Some Belgian participants felt that the preparation of *padaek* is not very hygienic. The Asian food that they do like is prepared without *padaek* and without the spice, which in most cases means it is not Lao food. For example, Pimai mentioned that her husband preferred to eat wok-cooked meals rather than eating a Lao meal such as a spicy papaya salad prepared with *padaek* sauce. She highlighted in her narrative the verb “to taste” (*sim*), which means taking a small portion of food to savour it and find out if it tastes good. She uses this verb to describe her husband’s attitude towards papaya salad: he is open to trying it and tasting it but does not consider it as his favourite food.

A couple in which the partners do not have the same food preferences might be considered particularly challenging for the wife. As mentioned in the section on the meaning of food in Laos, cooking is socially considered as the wife’s responsibility, based on the traditional gender roles within that society. The wife traditionally uses food as a “seduction tool” to satisfy her husband. Consequently, culinary choices are traditionally made according to the husband’s preferences. Should their Belgian husbands not like Lao food, some of the Laotian participants in my research learned to prepare Asian fusion or European meals to satisfy their husbands’ tastes. A few examples of such meals are *phat thai* (fried noodles), fried rice, spring rolls, and curry sauce.<sup>13</sup> Ketkeo (43 years old), married to Luc (45 years old), got in touch through her aunt and her Laotian husband who immigrated to Belgium in 1980. Before Ketkeo got married, her aunt gave her some advice about the taste of *falang* food and Belgian table manners.

My aunt told me that I should learn how to eat with a knife and fork. I should also learn to eat potatoes. My husband is very demanding about food (*kin yark*). This means that he cannot eat Lao food at all. She also taught me how to cook *falang* food. For example, if I cook chicken, I should only take the chicken breast.<sup>14</sup>

Ketkeo’s aunt also immigrated to Belgium. She gave some advice to Ketkeo, covering her role as a wife, a cook, and an immigrant. First, she said that Ketkeo should learn how to prepare food in the Belgian style to satisfy her partner. Second, she must learn to eat Belgian food (e.g., fried and mashed potatoes) and understand table etiquette (e.g., the use of a knife and fork when eating). The aunt said that this showed that she was integrating into Belgian society by learning local ways of preparing and consuming food. Especially before or at the beginning of the relationship, this is common among the Laotian participants who were planning to marry a Belgian man and immigrate to Belgium. They felt that, in order to achieve their marriage and migration goals, they must acquire the cultural and culinary practices linked to Belgian society.

**Food as a means of becoming a “good husband” and a “lucky wife”**  
(*sok dii*)

*Pimai*: I have read testimonies on social media from Thai Issan<sup>15</sup> women (who also immigrated to Belgium), and their husbands don't allow them to eat spicy food, garlic, or padaek. None of these ingredients are permitted at home. We were talking about this topic among our social network. It's really incredible. These falang cannot accept their wives' food. These women should rethink their choice of partner. Not all falang people are like these husbands. There must be some who can accept us as we are.

*Question*: What about your partner?

*Pimai*: I have everything (Lao and Asian ingredients) in my kitchen.

Pimai's narrative highlights the importance of food as reflection of individual identity. The food that Laotian spouses prefer is linked to their very personhood. This means that a husband who does not allow his wife to eat her preferred food does not accept her personhood. Pimai and her friends, who are also migrant spouses, appreciate having a partner who accepts the way they identify with specific food. They can evaluate whether their partner accepts them or not by examining their food consumption at home. From the point of view of the migrant spouses, the Thai spouses that Pimai talks about are in a toxic relationship. Not only did they lose their culinary freedom, but also had to live with partners who were not right for them. In this case, food practices become a way of evaluating compatibility between partners. Nok (37 years old) related the qualities of her husband with her food practices.

*Question*: What do you like about him?

*Nok*: He is a kind person (*chai di*). He knows my favourite food. He takes me to the Asian supermarket in Antwerp where I can find chilli peppers, papaya, and aubergine. Even though they are expensive, he does not forbid me from consuming it.

Nok's answer suggests how food consumption gives meaning to interactions between her and her husband. She evaluates the kindness (*chai di*) of her husband through her food practices. Living in Belgium, Emiel (Nok's husband) is aware that Lao food is his wife's comfort food:

I know that Lao food is important to my wife. I looked for information about Asian supermarkets for her and found some in Antwerp, Brussels and Maastricht.

To contribute towards his wife's comfort, he searched for information about the places where Nok can find her favourite foods, and took her there. The couple lives approximately 80 km from the city of Antwerp. There is a

neighbourhood known as China Town in Antwerp where there are many Asian supermarkets. Nok does not have a driving licence and does not feel comfortable taking the train alone. As a result, she is dependent on her husband in terms of mobility, something which requires some time from him. This is an indication that he pays attention to her needs. In addition, Nok highlighted the price of the food, emphasising the fact that she believes she has a good husband because he is the main provider of their household. In her view, he has the right to decide about household expenses. Even though food is expensive, he nevertheless chooses to satisfy his partner, which makes her feel a valued part of their intercultural couple. The experience of Nok and Emiel reveals that shops selling Asian food products not only make it possible for Laotian spouses to buy and eat their comfort food in Belgium but also enable Belgian men to fulfil their perceived roles as husbands. In other words, Emiel can express his love for Nok by accompanying her to a shop located far from their home, and by fulfilling his role as a provider.

Compared with the Thai Issan wife mentioned earlier in Pimai's narrative, Nok is considered to be a lucky wife (*sok di*) by members of the Laotian community. The term *sok di* is usually used to describe a woman who has the ideal husband. Specifically, this term relates to the financial dimension of a relationship and gender roles within the household. For example, it is used to describe a husband who fulfils his role as the main provider and faithful husband (Lapanun, 2019). Based on my data, the food practices in Laotian-Belgian couples can likewise categorise the "lucky wife".

For most of the Laotian participants in my research, a "lucky wife" is one who has a *falang* husband who can eat any Lao food. According to this definition, Mali (57 years old) is the luckiest of them all. Her Belgian husband, Jean (65 years old), enjoys eating Lao food as much as she does. The couple eats Lao food as most of their main meals. When I visited their home as part of my fieldwork, the couple welcomed me with Lao food: sticky rice with grilled fish and very spicy *padaek* sauce. In other words, meals involve all the original Laotian flavours. Mali does not prepare *falang* food for Jean. He ate everything with us. Turning back to Nok's relationship, her luck is a level below that of Mali because Nok's husband can eat spicy food but not *padaek*. She told me that sometimes she cooks Lao food that secretly includes a little bit of *padaek* sauce. The couple eats the meal, and Nok's husband is unaware that there is *padaek* sauce in the food.

In some cases, the husband (and children) can eat some Lao food, but without chilli peppers and *padeak*. In this case the Laotian spouses learn to cook other Asian foods and some *falang* food such as spaghetti, salad, and potatoes. They focus on meals that satisfy all the family members, including themselves, and allow them to share the same food. These Laotian spouses try to find a balance with regard to cooking Asian food and *falang* food for their daily meals. They see this as an individual adapting to the intercultural couple. As Khamkeo (49 years old) mentioned during the interview:

Most of the time, it's me who cooks. For example, if I cook Asian meals today, then tomorrow I will cook *falang* food .... Food practices are the easiest things in terms of adaptation (*papto*) in our couple.

For Khamkeo, adapting to one another's culture and personality is the norm. Compared to cultural beliefs, Khamkeo mentions that food practices do not create a conflict in the life of her couple. She is able to find a balance because all family members have common food preferences for Asian or *falang* meals.

In some cases, the Belgian husband and Laotian wife do not have common food preferences. In this configuration, each partner has their own food but they eat together at the same time. As some participants said, "we eat together but don't have the same food". The Laotian wives whose spouses cook for themselves are considered luckier than those who need to prepare food for their husbands. If there are children in the family, the Laotian spouses might have to take three different food preferences into account: one for themselves, one for their husband, and one for their children. Pimai's experience illustrates this situation:

In our everyday life, I eat my food and he eats his *falang* food. Since we have a child, I have to prepare three different types of food. We all eat differently. Now it's better, my husband cooks for himself and shares with our daughter. When I cook my food, I also share it with her. We eat different foods but we eat together.

Pimai's narrative underlines the evolution of how reproductive work (cooking) is distributed within her couple. As each family member does not have the same food preferences, it means that there have to be either different meals or one meal with different tastes. Since her husband learned to cook for himself, Pimai feels more relaxed and says "it's better" (*sabaiy kheuan*). She consequently has less work when it comes to preparing meals. Chinda (31 years old) mentioned that her family also has different food preferences. She chooses to adapt to the taste preferences of her husband and children and prepares only one type of food for everyone, a choice which makes her feel more relaxed:

We have different tastes. If I want to be relaxed (*sabaiy*), I eat like him. I can eat every kind of taste, but he cannot. If he wants to eat my food, I would have to prepare my type of food and his type of food. My children eat like my husband. Sometimes, *laap* (meat salad) is quite spicy for them, so I don't cook it often, as they can't eat it. If I have fish or chicken, I just add salt and paper, grill it, and add sticky rice to it. They all eat sticky rice. *Falang* food is easier to cook, like for example cooking a steak and eating it with potatoes. It's easy for me, and I can eat that with them. I only prepare Lao food rarely. I can eat *falang* food, because normally I don't eat much spicy food.

Chinda's case shows that although Asian food products can provide comfort for Laotian migrant spouses, she nevertheless chooses to consume just a few of these products. This choice can be first explained by her responsibility as the person who is in charge of cooking in her household. Reducing the cooking work means adapting to the different tastes within the family. Chinda is an exception among the Laotian participants I interviewed. She does not feel the need for spicy food on a daily basis, which allows her to eat the same food as her husband and children. She cooks in *falang* style, as she mentioned that the main ingredient is only pepper and salt. Another Laotian participant shared the idea that *falang* food like steak is easier to prepare compared to Lao food. A second reason for consuming a few Asian products is that cooking only one type of food enables Chinda to save money. In their household, Chinda's husband is the main provider. He manages the bank loan for his apartment and pays other charges and insurance. To financially help the household, Chinda is in charge of buying food. As Nok mentioned earlier, Asian ingredients are expensive in Belgium, and as a result, Chinda prefers to save her money for other investments.

According to the "gendered division of labour" in the household (Kergoat, 2005), cooking is the wife's duty. The perception of the "lucky wife" is related to this gender ideology. As wives and mothers, all the Laotian participants in my research believe that cooking is their responsibility. The participant who prepares three different meals does not complain about this to her husband, nor does she ask for help in the kitchen. Doing so would indicate a lack of luck. If the couple does not share the same food preferences and the husband cooks for himself, this makes the wife feel lucky. The husband is considered to be voluntarily helping to reduce the work in the kitchen. Of the 12 couples interviewed, only three involved the Belgian husband cooking. They cook for themselves because they do not eat the same food as their wives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the domestic food practices of Laotian-Belgian couples. It situates their food practices within their transnational context between Belgium and Laos. The chapter demonstrates how the social meanings of food in Laos and the socio-economic contexts of immigrant food in Belgium shape their food choices.

My empirical data shows that Lao food dominates the majority of the households studied. It acts as a comfort food for Laotian wives, as it is related to their cultural habitus while living as migrants in a new socio-cultural space (Belgium). Their need for comfort food leads them to various "conjugal arrangements" (Collet, 2020, p. 143) around the food practices in their household. The narratives of the individual partners in the couples suggest that their food arrangements are important parameters for sustaining a relationship linked to the gender roles in the household.

This research has shown that through immigrant supermarkets, especially the Asian food products shop in Belgium, Laotian participants were able to obtain the ingredients needed to prepare their comfort food. These shops also enable their Belgian spouses to fulfil their role as the main financial providers. When they fulfil this role by buying Asian products, their Laotian wives are very satisfied, given that Asian products are particularly expensive.

The chapter also shows that, generally, the Laotian wives have full responsibility for cooking and choosing food. These gender dynamics around family food have also been observed in the context of Belgian-Peruvian and Belgian-Filipino couples in Belgium (Gonzalez Alvarez and Fresnoza-Flot, 2020). Through cooking the foods of their home countries, Peruvian and Filipino migrant women who enjoyed freedom over food choices and consumption in their household were able to transmit their cultural identity to their children (ibid., 2020). The Laotian participants in my research seem to have a similar freedom. They prepare food not only based on their taste preferences but also their partner's and children's preferences. As a consequence, the food practices of the couple or the family are shaped by the different taste preferences in the household. Most Laotian wives felt attached to their Lao food, and their Belgian partners have the same affection for their *falang* food. Their children usually have similar taste preferences to their father, having been born and raised in Belgium. When the household has multiple taste preferences, preparing meals that suit everyone requires more work in the kitchen for Laotian wives. If the Belgian partner decides to participate in cooking, the wives feel thankful because cooking usually falls within their role.

Laotian spouses do not cook *falang* meals to develop their socio-national Belgian identity. The reason for cooking these meals for their household lies in their desire to fulfil their role as a wife, which means satisfying the tastes of their Belgian partner and their children. In contrast, most Laotian partners do not consume *falang* food at home, and their Belgian partners do not complain about this or consider it to be a sign of non-integration into Belgian society. On the contrary, the Belgian partners are aware of the feeling of comfort that their home country's food can bring to their partner.

The analysis of Laotian-Belgian couples' subjectivity about their culinary habits reveals two important conjugal norms that give meaning to marital life (*sivit khu*): individual freedom (*idsala*) and adaptation (*papto*). Rather than searching for shared food preferences, each partner is allowed to have individual taste preferences. The couple considers this as a sign of respect for one another's individual freedom. As Collet (2017) underlines, "mixed couples represent a social group with a highly individualised lifestyle, they negotiate their belongings and identities between themselves and with others, but, though not adamant about imposing cultural practices, they want to be free to choose" (p. 158). In some cases, couples prefer to share the same food and consequently legitimise this choice by considering it as a sign of adapting to one another. This means that the partners choose to adapt to each



other's taste preferences. This culinary adjustment represents, for them, an individual contribution to the life of the couple. The aforementioned conjugal norms emphasise the value of "self-appropriation" within conjugality in (post)modern times (Illouz, 2013).

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## Notes

- 1 All participants have been anonymised to protect their privacy.
- 2 See page 2 for an explanation of the meaning of the "real" Lao food.
- 3 According to the narratives of the Laotian participants in my research, "Asian food" refers to East and Southeast Asian fusion food: for example, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Thai dishes.
- 4 "European food" refers here to Belgian, French, or Italian dishes such as spaghetti, cheese, ham, and sandwiches.
- 5 The word "culture" in this chapter refers to the social norms and religious beliefs regulating, shaping, and affecting individuals' behaviour.
- 6 All the phrases and sentences cited in this chapter from the article by Strigler and Le Bihan (2001) are my own translation of the original sentences in French.
- 7 *Falang* food is a Laotian term that refers to European or American food such as croissants, steaks, pizzas, burgers, spaghetti, etc.
- 8 In this chapter, "Western" means the countries in the western and northern parts of the European continent, as well as the northern part of the American continent. "Asian" refers in this chapter to East and Southeast Asian countries.
- 9 Laotian migrant spouses in Belgium are connected to Thai migrant spouses who mostly hail from the northeast part of Thailand known as Issan. They share a common socio-cultural way of living and can easily communicate with one another through the Lao or Thai languages, which are quite similar.
- 10 Thai media has a dominant influence on Laotian society. Most Laotians consume Thai music, films, television series, and other programmes. They are aware of what is happening in Thai society. This is why Thai media can be considered as part of the socio-cultural impact of Laos.
- 11 Laotians categorise this type of food as Vietnamese or Thai.
- 12 *Kimchi* is a Korean food which includes fermented vegetables.
- 13 These meals are examples of Asian fusion food. They are usually considered as the preferred choice of not only Asian people (i.e., people from the Asian continent) but also non-Asian people. Many Asian restaurants in Belgium offer such food, indicating its considerable and widespread popularity.
- 14 In Lao-style cooking, all parts of a chicken can be cooked and eaten.
- 15 Thai Issan is the Laotian term for Thai citizens who originated from the northeast region of Thailand known as Issan.

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