

Expatriate Happiness in Thailand: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify and discuss the determinants of happiness of expatriates in Thailand. The questionnaire used was designed to collect information about happiness and life satisfaction, personal background, family ties and social support network, work, health, living conditions, acculturation strategies and cultural awareness, government policies, guiding principles in life, perceived past and future happiness and the happiness of others. Summary happiness statistics reveal that on average expatriates living in Thailand are happy and satisfied with life, with varying scores across life domains. The regression results suggest that age, gender, income aspirations and health are important for happiness, whereas income aspirations, health and being integrated seem to matter most for life satisfaction.

Keywords: Happiness, Satisfaction, Expatriates

1. Motivation

International migration is a global matter and understanding the issues surrounding it important. Research on international migration predominantly deals with the determinants of international migration and its impacts on (i) migrants themselves and their families (e.g. happiness), (ii) host countries and (iii) home countries. This paper focuses on the happiness of migrants themselves.

Thailand contributes to international migration by sending and receiving persons from abroad, including refugees, displaced persons, professional migrants, labour migrants and dependants (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005). Huguet and Punpuing (2005) estimate that about 200,000 registered foreign professionals and dependants (excluding registered workers and dependants from neighbouring countries, i.e. labour migrants) reside in Thailand, of which an estimated 102,446 are working, mainly with private-sector companies. 18% of these working registered foreign professionals are Japanese, while 7% are from the UK, 5% from the US and 3% from Australia. Not included in these estimates are those foreigners, who have lived in Thailand for a considerable period of time on a sequence of short-term visas and without work permit or those on retirement visas². The former typically work for businesses that do not want or are not eligible to apply for work permits and their number is estimated to exceed 10,000 (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005).

Foreign professionals are important for multinational and transnational companies and the problems arising from expatriates returning home prematurely or not performing well due to their inability to adequately deal with the transition to a new environment are significant for corporations (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Black, 1988 among others). Besides, foreign professionals may generate benefits for the host country if they fill skills shortages, with potential negative implications for the host country in case of unsuccessful adjustment.

Other foreigners staying in Thailand for periods of more than three months may also contribute to the socio-economic development in Thailand. The Thai partner in mixed marriages and his/her family, for example, may benefit from the foreign partner's steady stream of income from abroad, especially in rural areas, such as the Northeast. In addition, cross-cultural couples may persuade their friends and families to visit Thailand. However, as reported by Howard (2008) many Western retirees end up disillusioned, with financial problems.

² Data on foreigners on spouse/marriage visas are also not available.

³ This study takes the terms (subjective) well-being, life satisfaction and happiness to be interchangeable following Easterlin (2003) and acknowledges that the subjective well-being concept encompasses cognition and affect (Frey and Stutzer, 2001). While the latter is commonly referred to as hedonic well-being or experienced happiness, the former is often viewed as life satisfaction and entails an evaluation of life (Deaton and Kahneman, 2010).

Closely related to how well the move to Thailand works out, is the happiness³ of foreigners in their adopted country and its determinants. The literature has identified several sources of happiness in general, which, following Dolan, Peasgood and White (2007) and Layard (2005), can be classified into seven categories, namely income, personal characteristics, socially developed characteristics, how individuals spend their time, attitudes towards self, others and/or life, relationships and the wider economic, social and political environment. In addition, as for example reported in Sang, Wang and Zheng (2003) acculturation is of importance when examining the determinants of the happiness of migrants and sojourners and found to be positively related to subjective well-being. While a large body of literature seeks to explore the determinants of happiness, there are actually few studies that look at immigration and happiness.⁴

2. Prior Work

Happiness studies largely rely on evidence from survey data, where individuals are asked to rate their happiness on single- or multi-item scales. While until recently such data were deemed entirely subjective, it is now established that happiness can be measured in a scientific way. What people say about their happiness corresponds to for example actual levels of brain activity (Layard, 2005). With happiness data thus validated, a large body of literature has emerged that deals with happiness and its determinants. A common approach to estimate happiness equations is to simply regress happiness or life satisfaction on a set of socio-economic and other controls such as for example age, age squared, demographic and work characteristics, education and marital status (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2002).

The domains-of-life literature states that life satisfaction is determined by satisfaction in life domains, i.e. certain areas in life such as health, family, work, financial status, living conditions, social support network, with an additive relationship being commonly assumed. While most studies focus on satisfaction in one life domain, a number of studies examine satisfaction in several or all domains of life (van Praag et al., 2002, Rojas, 2007).

³ This study takes the terms (subjective) well-being, life satisfaction and happiness to be interchangeable following Easterlin (2003) and acknowledges that the subjective well-being concept encompasses cognition and affect (Frey and Stutzer, 2001). While the latter is commonly referred to as hedonic well-being or experienced happiness, the former is often viewed as life satisfaction and entails an evaluation of life (Deaton and Kahneman, 2010).

⁴ See, for example, Bălătescu (2007), who focuses on people who migrate because of their low levels of living, Borraz, Pozo and Rossi (2008) and Neto (2000), who look at the happiness of immigrants' family members.

Rather than going deeper into the literature concerned with validating happiness data as well as the determinants of and their relationship with happiness, this paper simply refers to articles dealing with reliability and validity and reviewing the general happiness literature such as Easterlin (2003, 2005), Dolan, Peasgood and White (2010), Frey and Stutzer (2000, 2001 and 2005), Kahnemann (1999, 2003), Powdthavee (2007) and van Praag (2006, 2002) among others.

Few studies examine possible links between immigration and happiness. Bălătescu (2007) examines Eastern European labour migrants' subjective well-being and reports lower satisfaction with life as a whole, but higher satisfaction with societal conditions (in the sense of state of the economy, national government, democracy, education and health services) than native citizens. This is explained using the concepts of social comparison and adaptation and interpreted to mean that in the former case the reference country is the receiving country whereas in the latter case it is the sending country. Lackland-Sam (2000) examines self-reported satisfaction with life and its determinants among international students at a university in Norway. Students from Europe and North America were found to be more satisfied than students from Africa and Asia. Other determinants of life-satisfaction identified include number of friends, satisfaction with finances, perceived discrimination and information received prior to the foreign sojourn. In addition to these general factors, acculturation is found to be of importance in a number of studies when examining the determinants of the happiness of migrants and sojourners. Rana-Deuba and Ward (1999) use data from international aid workers in Nepal and show that strong co-national identification is associated with enhanced psychological well-being and strong host-national identification with better sociocultural adaptation. Integrated sojourners experienced less psychological distress than others and assimilated sojourners less social difficulties. Following *inter alia* Berry (1997), Rana-Deuba and Ward (1999) and Kennedy and Ward (1999), Sang, Wang and Zheng (2003) for example examine two dimensions of acculturation (host and co-national identification) and four acculturation modes, namely integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization⁵, and their relationship to psychological (or emotional) and sociocultural (or behavioral) adjustment of Chinese students in Australia. They found that integrated Chinese students had higher subjective well-being scores than their assimilated, separated and marginalized peers. In addition, strong host and co-national identification seems to increase subjective well-being. Neto (2001) examines the degree of satisfaction with life among adolescents with immigrant background and its determinants. Using data for Portuguese, Angolan, Cape Verdean and Indian adolescents in Portugal, the results

⁵ Barry (2001) developed and evaluated an acculturation instrument to assess acculturation patterns across these four dimensions of acculturation among East Asian immigrants in the US.

reveal that there were only significant differences in terms of life satisfaction levels between Portuguese and Angolan adolescents. Mastery, i.e. the degree to which individuals feel in control of the challenges arising from adapting to a new cultural context, was the most important factor explaining life satisfaction. Other determinants included gender, self-esteem and living in an ethnically homogeneous neighbourhood. Selmer (1999) examines coping strategies of Western expatriate business managers in Hong Kong and find a positive association between problem focused coping (factor labelled tolerant and patient problem-solving) and socio-cultural and psychological adjustment, but a negative association in the case of symptom focused coping (factors labelled parent country escapism and expatriate refuge). Control variables included prior international experience, time in Hong Kong, nationality and position at work. In another study, Selmer (2004) examined psychological barriers to adjustment and shows that both perceived inability and unwillingness to adjust among new Western business expatriates in China seem to affect socio-cultural adjustment, but not psychological adjustment. The former, however, turned out to be of little importance in the long-run underlining that the length of stay in the foreign country matters. Aryee and Stone (1996) focus on expatriate work adjustment and its outcomes in terms of psychological well-being, using data of expatriate employees in Hong Kong. Work adjustment was found to be positively related to job satisfaction, but not to quality of life and marital adjustment. With respect to work role transition, role conflict, role discretion, co-worker support and work-method ambiguity are reported to be significantly related with work adjustment.

3. Data Collection⁶

This study relies on evidence from a survey. Four geographic areas are selected purposively, namely Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Udon Thani and the Eastern Seaboard, with questionnaires mostly distributed in the provincial capital and in case of the Eastern Seabord, mostly in Laem Chabang, Pattaya and Ban Chang. The target population is 21 years and above, living in Bangkok, Eastern Seaboard, Chiang Mai or Udon Thani, and can be categorised as expatriate (the term “expatriate” is used in this study in the context of persons born in and holding nationality of a high-income OECD country as classified by the World Bank and living (for a period exceeding three months) in Thailand.

Questionnaires were designed to collect information about happiness and life satisfaction, personal background, family ties and social support network, work, health and related aspects, living conditions (including family and friends living

⁶ Approval of this study project was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Health Science Group, Chulalongkorn University in March 2009.

nearby), acculturation strategies and cultural awareness, government policies, guiding principles in life, perceived past and future happiness and the happiness of others. Excluding personal and demographic factors, there were 120 questions with mostly Likert-type response scales (ranging from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 5, “strongly agree”). A total of 440 questionnaires were distributed in public places in the first half of 2009, of which 43 had to be discarded due to missing or inconsistent responses. The remaining data come from 98 responses in Bangkok, 82 in Chiang Mai, 94 in the Eastern Seaboard and 123 in Udon Thani. In addition, a number of questionnaires are incomplete.

4. A First Look at the Data: Sample Statistics

The mean and median age of respondents is 45 years, with the oldest being 80 and the youngest 21 years old. The sample is divided in three age groups, namely young age (21 to 39 years old), middle age (40 to 59 years old) and old age (60 years and above). The majority of young and middle aged expatriates reported that they were working in Thailand (62% and 59% respectively), while only 17% of the old age group did so. 21% of respondents were female, while 79% were male, in line with the common perception that most foreigners coming to Thailand are male. Most respondents are of European (51%), American (26%) or Australian (8%) nationality. Interestingly, only 3% are of Japanese nationality, which is different from the data reported in Hugut and Punpuing (2005), who state that 18% of working registered foreign professionals are Japanese, while 7% are from the UK, 5% from the US and 3% from Australia. The authors note, however, that not included in these estimates are those foreigners, who have lived in Thailand for a considerable period of time on a sequence of short-term visas and without work permit or those on retirement visas. Summary statistics further show that 41% of respondents are married, 32% single, 15% with partner and 11% divorced. Only 1% reported being widowed. Of those expatriates who are married or with partner, 46% had a spouse or partner of Thai nationality, 33% of other nationality and 21% chose not to answer.

Work placement seems to be a motivating force behind the move to Thailand and 59% of respondents completed tertiary education with an average length of prior international experience of 3.5 years.

A number of questions focused on acculturation strategies. On the basis of these questions, about 60% of respondents could be classified as integrated, that is they are maintaining strong ties with their own original culture as well as the mainstream culture. 6% of respondents are classified assimilated (i.e. maintaining strong ties with their original culture, but weak ties with the mainstream culture), 6% separated (i.e. maintaining weak ties with their original culture, but strong ties with the mainstream culture) and only 3% marginalised (i.e. maintaining weak ties with their original culture and weak ties with the mainstream culture). Interestingly, about 25% of respondents

do not seem to pursue a clear-cut acculturation strategy.

5. Summary Statistics of Subjective Well-being

Summary statistics of happiness, life satisfaction and satisfaction with various life domains as well as the happiness of spouse/partner and children are presented in Table 1.

The results show that expatriates living in Thailand are on average happy and satisfied with life, with happiness scores mostly exceeding life satisfaction scores. While respondents report that they are satisfied with their relationship with family members, they seem to be more satisfied with the relationship they have with their spouse and children than with their siblings and parents, which may be due to the fact that the latter mostly do not live in Thailand. On average, expatriates are satisfied with the relationship they have with their friends, work, living conditions and health status, but to a lesser extent with their financial status. Interestingly, respondents are not satisfied with their religion. In line with the above, expatriates perceive their children and spouse to be happy and satisfied, the latter, however, to a lesser extent.

Table 1 Summary Statistics of Happiness and Life Satisfaction

	Total obs. mean	Male obs. mean	Female obs. mean	Young age obs. mean	Middle age obs. mean	Old age obs. mean
Happiness	377 4.40	297 4.35	80 4.56	139 4.48	155 4.29	83 4.46
Life satisfaction	362 4.32	288 4.29	74 4.45	130 4.37	150 4.29	82 4.30
Satisfaction with relationship with spouse	209 4.41	170 4.35	39 4.64	55 4.49	98 4.35	56 4.43
Satisfaction with relationship with children	160 4.34	128 4.32	32 4.44	27 4.67	87 4.29	46 4.26
Satisfaction with relationship with siblings	148 4.09	107 4.02	41 4.29	71 4.24	53 3.92	24 4.04
Satisfaction with relationship with parents	311 3.94	243 3.90	68 4.09	121 4.11	123 3.93	67 3.66
Satisfaction with relationship with friends	367 4.34	289 4.33	78 4.38	140 4.44	145 4.23	82 4.37
Satisfaction with work	202 4.24	142 4.17	60 4.43	91 4.31	96 4.18	15 4.33
Satisfaction with financial status	380 3.98	300 3.97	80 3.99	139 3.82	159 4.05	82 4.10
Satisfaction with health status	374 4.13	295 4.11	79 4.20	141 4.15	152 4.13	81 4.09
Satisfaction with religion	345 2.46	274 2.24	71 3.30	128 2.71	143 2.57	74 1.80
Satisfaction with living conditions	374 4.32	299 4.31	75 4.32	138 4.31	152 4.31	84 4.33
Satisfaction with government (visa and work permit procedures)	376 3.11	298 3.03	78 3.41	141 3.11	154 3.27	81 2.80
Happiness of spouse/partner	198 4.25	163 4.21	35 4.43	52 4.35	90 4.28	56 4.13
Happiness of children	150 4.44	120 4.45	30 4.40	26 4.77	82 4.32	42 4.48

Note: n.r.: no response, obs.: observation

When splitting the sample across male and female, the summary statistics reveal that female expatriates are on average happier and more satisfied with life than male expatriates. Interestingly, female expatriates are also on average more satisfied with the relationship they have with their family members than males, which may reflect their traditional role as care-takers of the family, albeit to a lesser extent with siblings and parents than with their spouse and children. Similarly, across all other life domains females also report themselves on average happier, especially

with respect to their satisfaction with religion. Males and females on average perceive their spouse and children to be happy.

The summary statistics obtained from splitting the sample across three age groups, namely young age, middle age and old age, seem to support the U-shaped relationship discussed in the literature, although cohort effects may be present.

6. Determinants of Happiness: Scale of Importance

Respondents were also asked to rank the determinants of happiness (dimensions of life domains, namely family ties, work, financial security, social support, personal health, living condition, religion and personal values) (i) when they were 40 years old, (ii) at present and (iii) in the future.

Table 2 Importance of Life Domains

All			Male			Female		
	mean	obs.		mean	obs.		mean	obs.
family ties	3.39	284	family ties	3.51	216	family ties	3.01	68
health	4.02	284	health	3.87	216	work	3.97	68
financial security	4.08	284	financial security	4.06	216	financial security	4.15	68
work	4.54	284	work	4.72	216	health	4.50	68
social network	5.10	284	social support	5.08	216	social support	5.16	68
personal values	5.24	284	personal values	5.25	216	personal values	5.21	68
living conditions	5.68	284	living condition	5.63	216	living conditions	5.85	68
religion	6.86	284	religion	7.07	216	religion	6.19	68

Young age			Middle age			Old age		
	mean	obs.		mean	obs.		mean	obs.
family ties	3.48	126	family ties	3.36	98	health	2.98	60
work	4.01	126	financial security	3.72	98	family ties	3.28	60
financial security	4.33	126	health	4.11	98	financial security	4.13	60
health	4.44	126	work	4.27	98	living condition	5.07	60
social support	4.76	126	social support	5.33	98	personal values	5.30	60
personal values	5.05	126	personal values	5.46	98	social support	5.43	60
living conditions	6.10	126	living conditions	5.51	98	work	6.12	60
religion	6.47	126	religion	7.23	98	religion	7.07	60

Table 2 shows the results of this ranking for all expatriates, male and female as well as across the three age groups. These rankings suggest a number of interesting findings. First, most important determinants of happiness seem to be family ties, health and financial security, and for female and young expatriates work. Religion is perceived to be least important.

Second, differences across the three age groups seem to exist. While family ties, work and financial security are most important for young expatriates, middle

age expatriates rank family ties, financial security and health as most important. For elderly expatriates, health is ranked as most important and work and religion as least important. While living conditions are not ranked very important by young and middle aged expatriates, these appear to be more important for elderly expatriates.

7. Empirical Findings

The effects of individual characteristics on happiness and life satisfaction of expatriates are examined in this section. As happiness and life satisfaction are measured on an ordinal scale, an ordered probit model is estimated. Regression results using data for 397 expatriates are presented in Table 3. Happiness and life satisfaction are used as alternative dependent variables. Since some respondents chose not to answer all questions, less than 397 observations could eventually be used. The explanatory variables in columns two to five include age, gender, marital status, educational attainment, perceived relative income and income aspirations. In columns six to nine, time spent with family, perceived health status and acculturation strategy are also included.

Table 3 Ordered Probit Regression Results: Socio-economic and Other Controls

	Happiness	Std. Error	Satisfaction	Std. Error	Happiness	Std. Error	Satisfaction	Std. Error
Age	-0.074 ***	0.028	-0.029	0.027	-0.076 **	0.032	-0.035	0.031
Age-squared	0.001 ***	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001 **	0.000	0.000	0.000
Male	-0.372 **	0.163	-0.172	0.163	-0.371 **	0.189	-0.187	0.189
Graduate degree	0.030	0.154	0.016	0.152	-0.131	0.182	0.019	0.186
Marital status	0.000	0.129	0.084	0.129	0.008	0.159	0.023	0.162
Income aspirations	0.180 ***	0.065	0.141 **	0.066	0.196 **	0.082	0.175 **	0.084
Relative income	0.012	0.066	0.017	0.066	0.037	0.078	0.009	0.078
Time with family					-0.001	0.004	0.003	0.004
Healthy					0.325 ***	0.091	0.243 ***	0.092
Integration					0.030	0.177	0.427 **	0.177
Obs.	360		344		277		260	

*, **, *** significant at 10%, 5% and 1% level

In line with the literature, the results seem to support a U-shaped relationship between happiness and age as evidenced in the significant and negative sign on the coefficient of the age variable and the significant and positive sign on the coefficient of the age squared variable. Male expatriates seem to be less happy than female expatriates as suggested above. Interestingly, neither higher education nor marital status appear to be of importance. Also, the coefficient of the relative income variable is insignificant in all regressions. The variable that captures income aspirations, however, enters all regressions with a positive and significant sign. As expected, expatriates who perceive their money as sufficient to buy the things they need report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.

In addition, health seems to be important for happiness and life satisfaction. In line with the literature, integrated expatriates seem to be more satisfied with life, albeit not happier, than expatriates using other acculturation strategies, underlining that happiness and life satisfaction are different concepts as for example discussed in Gundelach and Kreiner (2004), who suggest that life satisfaction is determined by the perceived extent of being in control of one's life. Time spent with family does not appear to be of importance.

8. Concluding Remarks

This paper seeks to identify and discuss the determinants of and examine their relationship with the happiness of expatriates in Thailand. The questionnaire used was designed to collect information about happiness and life satisfaction, personal background, family ties and social support network, work, health, living conditions, acculturation strategies and cultural awareness, government policies, guiding principles in life, perceived past and future happiness and the happiness of others. Summary happiness statistics reveal that on average expatriates living in Thailand are happy and satisfied with life, with varying scores across life domains. The summary statistics obtained from splitting the sample across three age groups, namely young age, middle age and old age, seem to support the U-shaped relationship discussed in the literature. The data suggest further that the most important determinants of happiness are perceived to be family ties, health and financial security, with religion perceived as least important.

The regression results further show that age, gender, income aspirations and health are important for happiness, whereas income aspirations, health and being integrated seem to matter most for life satisfaction.

The results from this study could potentially lead to some interesting implications, especially for individuals since everybody has some influence on the resources that generate happiness and life satisfaction. In light of the survey design and the difficulties surrounding survey implementation, however, the results must be understood as indicative and further research is needed. Also, this paper has neither addressed the causality issue inherent in many studies that deal with the economics of happiness nor used alternative specifications to check robustness. These issues are left for future research.

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