The precarity and persuasion of migration in rural Bangladesh

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Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh

Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Peter Harry Ballis, and Vaughan Higgins. 2017.

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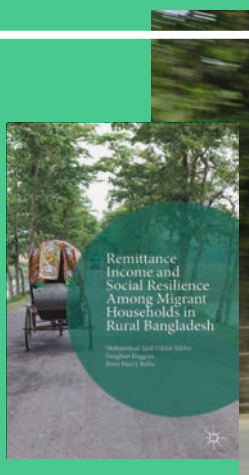

Above: Motion In Rural Pabna, Bangladesh. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Saadat Shahidi on Flickr. Original Image: https://www.flickr.com/photos/saadatshahidi/33298687890. License: CC BY-NC 2.0

The case for studying migration and its outcomes

The issue of human migration has never been more pertinent than now. The World Bank's latest Groundswell Report (Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration, The World Bank, 19 March 2018) predicts that Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America could see more than 140 million people move within their countries' borders by 2050. Simultaneously, the International Migration Report (The International Migration Report 2017 (Highlights), United Nations, 18 December 2017) found that 3.4 per cent of the world's population are international migrants, up by 49 per cent since 2000. But what do these numbers mean for the experience of migration? How does this ever-increasing flow of migrants shape lives of those who move and those who are left behind? And do remittances really help improve quality of life?

Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh answers these questions by drawing on rich empirical evidence from Bangladesh, a country at the interface of poverty, rapid development, and a large, increasingly mobile population. The book focusses on the impacts of remittances on migrant households, especially on those who are left behind, to draw conclusions about how households use remittances to change their life circumstances, adapt to crises, and plan for the future. To study the impacts of remittances, Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Peter Harry Ballis, and Vaughan Higgins use the lens of social resilience, commonly understood as the ability to bounce back or cope in the face of substantial adversity. Early in the book, they rightly question the idea of remittances only being 'inflows of money from migrants to their families' saying they go beyond monetary flows to encompass technological transfers and social remittances such as skills, practices, and identities.

The book draws on in-depth interviews with 36 migrant households – a small number that compensates in depth what it lacks in breadth. Chapters 1 and 2 set the context through a review of the extensive literature on the role of remittances in household income and consumption. Importantly, rather than exploring this seemingly binary relationship of remittances and household spending, the authors expand the 'uses' of remittances by assessing their impacts on social resilience.

The uneven geography of remittances

Across chapters 3–6, the authors use their rich empirical evidence and an intimate understanding of the study sites to elaborate on three key aspects of migration. First, they discuss 'life chances' (p.119) or circumstances that allow remittances to be used to create opportunities to improve quality of life.

These are explained through examples of how remittances are used to improve food security and enable spending on clothes, durable assets, constructing houses, and children's education. Encouragingly, the discussion demonstrates the dynamic nature of livelihoods and the opportunistic nature of household risk management, thus making an important contribution to studies around the 'climate-migration-development nexus' (Giovanna Gioli et al., Human mobility, climate adaptation, and development, *Migration and Development* 5(2), 2016: 165).

Second, the authors demonstrate how remittances change the household economy, by providing people required finances to invest in other income-generating activities. The analysis also highlights the intangible benefits that accrue from remittances such as promoting individual status and prestige, and increasing personal satisfaction. In this way, the book corroborates existing evidence on the positive aspects of remittances; as a means of livelihood diversification and a form of insurance.

Finally, and most importantly in my view, the book discusses the 'uneven geography of remittances' (p.191) to demonstrate that not all households benefit equally through remittances. They show that the socio-economic benefits of remittances are differentiated based on factors internal to the household (e.g. idiosyncratic events such as illness, the centrality of remittances to total household income), and external to the household (e.g. availability and nature of jobs in destination areas).

Final words

Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh is a useful read for migration researchers, development practitioners, and students interested in development studies and livelihoods research.

Overall, an engaging read, what adds depth to the analysis is the use of extensive quotes from migrants and family members left behind and the pictures that give readers, even those unfamiliar with the Bangladeshi or South Asian context, an opportunity to understand local conditions and everyday living. While I would have enjoyed a deeper conceptual engagement with social resilience, the book definitely adds to the current migration and livelihoods literature.

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Religion–state relations

Weller et al. challenge two dominant hypotheses in the study of engaged religion: the interfering state and the state failure hypotheses. While the former holds that state interference with grass-roots philanthropies leads to the deterioration of these charitable endeavors, the latter attributes the contemporary proliferation of grassroots charities to state's failure to provide social assistance. Both of these hypotheses, the authors insist, do not hold up well in the contexts of China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. On the one hand, the state in these three societies are neither failed nor weak states. All three states are powerful enough to regulate and interfere with philanthropic causes, and neither Taiwan nor Malaysia ever tried to function as a welfare state so there has been no welfare retrenchment. On the other hand, state endorsement can be crucial for the success and survival of religious philanthropies. Weller et al. argue that the rise of religious philanthropies signifies a "different model of governance in which the state is able to access and better harness grassroots desire to contribute to the public good" (p.59).

The authors thus propose to look at political merit-making, that is, "the relationships religious groups cultivate with the state in order to gain more legitimacy, political support, autonomy, or even ways of influencing policy-making" (p.59). The monograph documents three different patterns of religion–state relationship. In China, political merit-making is *defensive* as the state controls religious organizations through the methods of financial auditing and registration. Thus, it is in the interest of the organizations to develop political merit with state officials (p.70). In Taiwan, religious organizations and the state has a *collaborative* relationship – a domain where political power is legitimized through politicians' involvement in religious philanthropy; and religious activities benefit from state endorsement (p.74). In Malaysia, political merit-making is *enclaved* because of Malaysian's policy to limit charity to ethnic enclaves; Chinese religious institutions can be free from governmental control if their activities stay in the Chinese enclave (p.83). These patterns demonstrate that industrialized philanthropy is distinctively configured based on the local historical and political conditions.

A new subjectivity

As mentioned, central to industrialized philanthropy is a new vision of subjectivity, that of "volunteers as deployable agents of civic love" who are ready to dedicate time and resources to the 'Protestantized' voluntary imperative, and who willingly embrace a cosmopolitan identity and embody the collective ideals of 'loving hearts' (p.122). Tzu Chi volunteers in Taiwan, China, and Malaysia, as well as those from other religious institutions, participate in what Weller et al. refer to as 'civic selving', where volunteers engage the common good and place themselves in a larger moral and political order predicated on the notion of the cosmopolitan unlimited good (p.124). A notable trend in all three societies is that women and young people are leaders and active participants of newer forms of industrialized philanthropy. This stands in stark contrast with previous forms of charitable activities by local Chinese temples and lineage associations whose leaders are "relatively wealthy, middle-aged or older, and almost always male" (p.143).

Weller et al. observe that despite certain shared characteristics, civic selving does vary among the three societies. While civic selving in China and Taiwan harkens back to socialist morality and the Kuomintang's civility campaign respectively, civic selving in Malaysia attempts to go beyond the Chinese ethnic enclave and "thus breaking away from the ghettoization of purely Chinese associational life" (pp.124–5). It is also important to note that the Chinese understanding of goodness has a long heritage in Chinese notions of benevolence (仁) and impartial love (兼爱), the Daoist vision of cosmic retribution, and the Buddhist field of merits and bodhisattva ideals (pp.90–100). In tracing these linkages to Chinese traditions and the varieties of civic selving, Weller et al. refrain from calling these new volunteers 'neo-liberal' and thus destabilize the usage of neo-liberalism as a dominant analytical lens to examine new forms of religious voluntarism and philanthropy. As such, Weller et al. join other scholars of East Asia (e.g. Donald M. Nonini, Is China becoming neoliberal?, *Critique of Anthropology* 28(2), 2008: 145–76; Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkowich, How is neoliberalism good to think Vietnam? How is Vietnam good to think neoliberalism?, *Positions* 20(2), 2012: 379–401) in registering their concerns about the applicability of neo-liberalism to the contexts of East Asian societies where the states remain consistently present in many spheres of social life.

With *Religion and Charity* Weller et al. have written a timely monograph that explores the complexity of religion's involvement in the provision of social welfare and the public good in Chinese societies. The book draws on a wealth of ethnographic materials collected during a span of more than four decades of research. While industrialized philanthropy and the unlimited good have come to dominate Chinese engaged religions in the last decades, Weller et al. carefully show towards the end of the book that alternative visions of goodness continue to exist, focusing on local community building, cultural heritage, spiritual life, and daily problem-solving (p.180). The book proposes rigorous conceptual and theoretical frameworks to productively investigate the rise of religious voluntarism in Asia. As a comparative study, the book at times sacrifices depth for breadth. A multitude of examples of religious organizations are included, but the fragmented treatment of these otherwise complex operations are streamlined to achieve theoretical coherence. This shortcoming, however, does not negate the theoretical significance of the book. It will provide the roadmap for innovative anthropological theory on the subject of engaged religions in East Asian societies and encourage further research into religious voluntarism and what Joel Robbins calls 'the anthropology of the good' (Joel Robbins, Beyond the suffering subject: Toward an anthropology of the good, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19(3), 2013: 447–62).

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