

# Asian migration studies

Recent publications and new directions

Michiel Baas



In recent years the field of migration studies focusing on Asia has not only made important strides in capturing the lives, livelihoods and trajectories of Asian migrants but also made significant contributions towards the development of the field in general. The Asian Migration cluster of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) of the National University of Singapore, together with collaborating institutions at Humboldt University (Berlin), Sorbonne (Paris) and Waseda University (Tokyo) have been of particular influence here. These collaborations have also shed important light on the way the Asia-Pacific region is connected with Africa, Europe and the Gulf through skilled migration. This article pays attention to a number of recent publications that have emerged out of these collaborations; while I will be paying attention to some publications of which I am the editor or lead author, the main point is to show that the field of Asian migration studies is in motion and to highlight the new directions it has been taking in recent years.

## Paradigmatic shifts<sup>1</sup>

The field of migration studies has gone through various paradigmatic shifts over time, influenced by research findings as well as changes in the geopolitical, sociocultural and economic landscape across sending and receiving nations. Initially the field was characterized by a deeply functionalist approach that sought to explain migration via various push and pull factors. The eventual goal here was not just 'explaining' but also 'predicting' migration. Migration was understood to describe a process from A to B with an eventual return home, which was conceptualized in terms of failure or success overseas.

Questions of integration and assimilation initially also built upon this and especially in Europe this led to significant public debates.

The 1990s introduced an important paradigmatic shift with its introduction of the concept of transnationalism. A growing number of migrants were observed to maintain multiple ties and connections between home and host country and these transnational lifestyles were made possible by the arrival of budget carriers and advances in telecommunications and media. As a result, migration studies had to refocus its attention on the multiplicity of migrant lives.

The introduction of the 'new mobilities paradigm' by Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) confronted the field with new questions of how to understand the mobile trajectories of migrants across the globe.<sup>2</sup> This new paradigm is not simply about asserting that the world is more mobile than ever, rather it seeks to highlight the complex character of mobility systems that regulate movement. Migration is not only about crossing borders but also about not-moving, waiting, and related constraints imposed by sending and receiving nation-states.

## Migration industry and brokerage

The recent focus on the question of mobility itself has made scholars realize more than ever before that migration cannot solely be understood by focusing on either the sending or receiving side. While studies of transnationalism had already tried to unite both in its focus, the (commercial) networks that facilitate migration – and which in fact made it possible to migrate in the first place – remained understudied. Meanwhile, the commercialization of migration pathways has opened up the opportunity to live and work in another country to an ever-widening group of migrants. This seems to stand in direct relation to the ongoing formalization and regulation of migration trajectories that make it almost impossible for low-skilled migrants to seek out the services of specialists (agents, brokers, etc.). The emergence of a migration industry – composed among others of agents, brokers, and training institutes – across Asia needs to be understood in this light.

Recent publications that have engaged with the functioning of the migration industry in Asia usually do so taking Johan Lindquist, Xiang Biao and Brenda Yeoh's (2012) important assertion to think of it as a black box, as a point of departure.<sup>3</sup> It was also an important source of inspiration for an ARI-held workshop in 2017 titled "The Migration Industry: Facilitators and Brokerage in Asia", which brought together a variety of researchers with a strong ethnographic focus on the topic. Three distinct publications have emerged from this workshop. The first was a special issue with *Pacific Affairs* (2018) edited by Tina Shrestha (now with Waseda University), whose own work focuses on Nepali outmigration to Malaysia and Japan.<sup>4</sup> This special issue's focus is determinedly on the practices of brokerage (mediating, facilitation) and the making of migration infrastructures. Together, the articles put the spotlight on the specific histories and political processes that have contributed to the emergence of brokerage practices and the way they stand in relation to migration regimes.

It is a line also followed in a recently published Palgrave Pivot edited volume *The Migration Industry in Asia: Brokerage, Gender and Precariousness* (2020),<sup>5</sup> which brings together another set of papers from the workshop. Here the focus is more on the pragmatics of the industry, the ways in which agents/brokers negotiate these, and the impact this has on migrants themselves. In my own contribution to this volume, I try to understand the composition of the amounts low-skilled migrants from Tamil Nadu pay

to their agents and brokers, and by doing so also try to find an answer to the question why certain destinations such as Singapore are so much more expensive to migrate to than those in the Middle East. Bringing together case studies focusing on internal migration

in Indonesia, issues of legality and illegality among Myanmar migrants in Thailand, and the complexity of regulating and mediating migration from India, the volume is primarily set up to encourage future research on the topic.

A final set of papers appeared in a special section with *International Migration* (2019) and pays attention to the emerging category of student-migrant and the entanglement of the education and migration industries in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> While it may appear that this constitutes a separate type of industry that offers migration pathways to a very different group of (often high-skilled) migrants, it is revealing for the way skilled migration programs are interlinked with various interests related to nation's economies and industries.

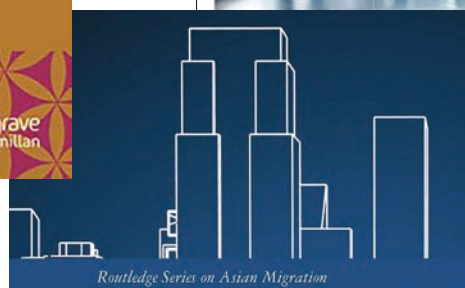
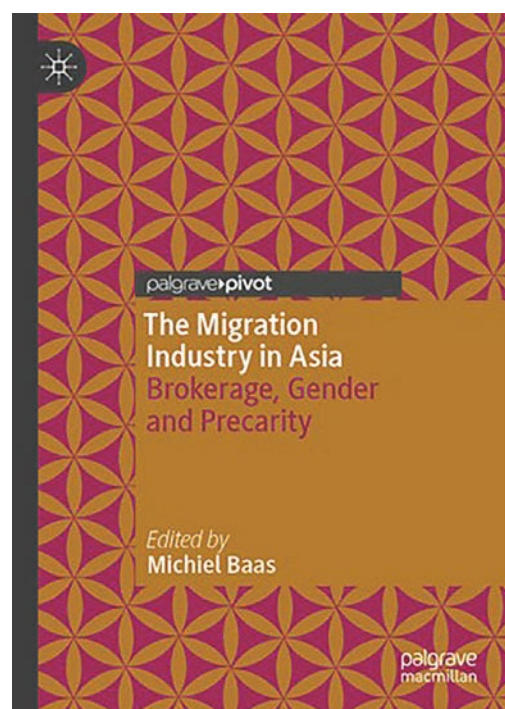
## The question of skill

The rapidly growing number of so-called student-migrants in Asia has not only zoomed in on the way skilled migration programs and international education ambitions speak to each other, but has also contributed to a renewed focus on questions related to skill in general. As is the case in Australia, Singapore and elsewhere, international students are often welcomed as 'potential' skilled migrants who may eventually stay on (either permanently or temporarily) after graduation. As such they have increasingly become integral to skilled migration programs. While in Australia this has led to critical questions about the actual skills student-migrants possess upon completion of their degrees, such developments have also contributed to a more general inquiry into what 'skill' actually is and how skills are ranked in terms of high and low.

In light of such discussions, a recent (2020) special issue with the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (JEMS) addresses the social construction of the idea of skill.<sup>7</sup> In it, Gracia Liu-Farrer, Brenda Yeoh and I ask who the arbitrators of skill are, how skill is constructed in the migration process and in turn, how it affects mobility. It brings together a set

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## INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS IN CHINA'S GLOBAL CITY

THE NEW SHANGHAILANDERS

James Farrer

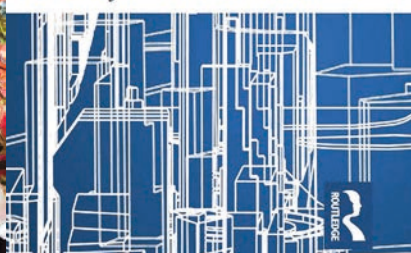


Edited by Michiel Baas

## The Asian Migrant's Body

Emotion, Gender and Sexuality

Amsterdam  
University  
Press



## Immigrant Japan

Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-nationalist Society

Gracia Liu-Farrer

of papers that were initially presented at a workshop held in Tokyo and jointly organized by Waseda University and the Asia Research Institute. Welcoming researchers working on Asia, but also including those whose work focuses on the Middle East, helped broaden perspectives and develop an understanding of how different migration regimes compare with and speak to each other. What is striking is how much skill and its hierarchical layering is often deeply subjective, and how migration pathways are as a result characterized by unequal opportunities and rights.

The JEMS special issue pays specific attention to the emergence of Japan as a migration destination. In contrast to the country's former image as one of Asia's most closed-off nations to migrants, more recently it has come to boast one of the most open skilled migration programs. This is also the focus of Gracia Liu-Farrer's recent and timely book *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-nationalist Society* (2020),<sup>9</sup> just published by Cornell University Press. The fact that former Asian sending nations are now becoming destinations for skilled migrants themselves, also emerges from James Farrer's recent book *International Migrants in China's Global City* (2019), with its focus on, as he calls it, 'the new Shanghailanders'.<sup>10</sup> While central to his exploration are migrants ('expats') from the West who have made Shanghai their home prior to China more generally becoming a migration destination for skilled migrants,

it also illuminates how old- and newcomers relate to each other. Besides that, Farrer pays specific attention to how the perspective of *laowai* or foreigners itself has changed. The emergence of Shanghai as a financial powerhouse and global city forms an important backdrop for the analysis. As such, it also points at important geopolitical changes that have put the spotlight on Asian nations, not just as 'emerging', but now ranking as among the most important economies. Recent work, which I won't discuss here in detail has, for instance, investigated how this has changed dynamics of race, and especially that of 'being white', as a factor of privilege in migrant/expat trajectories in Asian cities.

### Temporalities and transience

Migration-focused journal *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration*, which Melbourne-based RMIT-scholar Catherine Gomes recently launched and continues to helm, speaks to some of the concerns that also percolate through earlier mentioned studies. Especially the emergence of mid-level skilled migrants – that I myself conceptualized as the 'mobile middle' (2017) in the journal's opening issue<sup>10</sup> – raises new and important questions here. Often highly-educated but not employed in positions that neatly correspond to their level of education, this

concerns a new generation of migrants who actively challenge the boundaries and constraints of migration systems. Earlier-mentioned student-migrants could be considered as one such category, especially in terms of their (part-time) employment in professions that do not match their qualifications. But as the work of emerging migration scholars also shows, this field is surprisingly diverse. Seonyoung Seo's research on Nepali 'middle class' migrants in South Korea is particularly relevant here. Experiencing downward mobility as part of their migration trajectories, their position within the country's Employment Permit System also puts them in a particularly precarious position.

One of Seo's publications appeared in a special issue with *Current Sociology*, co-edited by Brenda Yeoh and myself, which focused on migrant temporalities in an attempt to raise awareness for the role time itself plays in migration trajectories.<sup>11</sup> In this special issue, we suggest to think of this focus as another paradigmatic shift, which like the focus on the migration industry builds on the mobilities turn and its focus on non-movement, waiting and other constraints that migration regimes put in place for cross-border mobility. It is in particularly Western Sydney University scholar Shanthi Robertson's work that has shed important light on how the concept of time and temporality can help add understanding of how migrants negotiate their lives across borders, not just being dependent on the way migration infrastructures occasionally put constraints on opportunities of employment and, more in general, their life on hold, but also literally demands of them to organize their life according to the schedules of their employers while keeping in mind the time-zone their family back home 'exists' in.

### Migrant's body and visibility

Above-mentioned research has also contributed to a growing awareness of the migrant's body (and associated emotions, feelings and experiences). Amsterdam University Press published an edited volume titled *The Asian Migrant's Body: Emotion, Gender and Sexuality* (2020).<sup>12</sup> It raises two important questions: How is the migrant's body impacted by the trajectory embarked on? And how is this body utilized as part of this? In the co-authored Introduction, Peidong Yang and I unpack how we may ground this question in theory, especially with respect to questions of embodiment, agency and visibility. As the contributions to the volume show – ranging from female beer sellers in Southeast Asia (Denise L. Spitzer) and migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (Amrita Pande) and Singapore (Maria Platt et al.), to same-sex migrants in the Middle East and South Asian employees in the beauty industry in California (Hareem Khan) – factors of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity all contribute to the way a migration trajectory is experienced at an individual level.

The question of visibility also speaks to issues of diversity and visibility that were central to two different collaborative workshops between the Asia Research Institute and European Universities. The first such workshop (2017) was with Humboldt University (initiated and hosted by Magdalena Nowicka) and focused specifically on migrant encounters and diversity of urban space. Bringing together papers from all-over the world it gave important impetus to the question of how diversity is experienced and the way migrants are 'encountered'. The latter also figured as an important question in a jointly organized workshop in Paris, hosted by INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) and the Sorbonne. Through Delphine Pages-El Karoui and colleagues' contributions – whose work is primarily oriented toward the Middle East – we were able to develop a comparative perspective on migrant diversity and visibility in respective cities. Ongoing attempts to segregate low-skilled migrants from day-to-day urban life by housing them in far-off dormitories and restricting their movement contrasted markedly with these cities' ambitions to radiate cosmopolitanism, characterized by diversity.

### New directions

What these publications and the collaborations show is not just that the question of mobility is integral to the study of migration, but that the field itself is constantly in motion as well. As Peidong Yang's more recent work also underlines, with its focus on Chinese 'foreign talent' students in Singapore and Indian medical students in China, the profiles across the Asia-Pacific region is becoming increasingly diverse. Asian nations like Japan, South Korea and China, which were formerly mainly known for restricting immigration policies themselves, are now actively recruiting variously skilled migrants. Important factors of influence here are not just the desire for global competitiveness – thus resulting in a talent race for the best and brightest – but also rapidly ageing societies and low fertility rates.

The corona-crisis which is likely to be ongoing when this Newsletter goes to press, has again raised awareness to the plight of migrant workers across Asia and the Gulf. The mass exodus of migrant workers from Indian cities to their hometowns and villages has already made headlines and underlines the importance of research in internal as much as international migration. A first publication that addresses this has just come out. Carefully edited and brought together by Ranabir Samaddar, it is titled *Borders of an Epidemic: Covid-19 and Migrant Workers* (2020).<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that in the coming years we will see important analysis of the impact the outbreak of the virus has had on the lives, well-being and futures of migrant workers everywhere. But with the limitations it has put on mobility, the question of mobility more general will be at the forefront of many new research projects and publications. In line with the earlier-mentioned mobility turn, questions will more than ever revolve around immobility and the governance of mobility. Who gets to migrate, under what conditions, for how long and where to, will be more important to such projects than ever before.

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#### Notes

- 1 This introduction draws upon Baas, M. & Yeoh, B. 2019. 'Introduction: Critical Temporalities and Migration Studies', *Current Sociology* 67(2):161-68; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118792924>
- 2 Sheller, M. & Urry, J. 2006. 'The New Mobilities Paradigm', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38(2): 207-226; <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- 3 Xiang, B., Yeoh, B. and Lindquist, J. 2012. 'Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia', *Pacific Affairs* 85(1):7-19; <https://pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/ubc-product/volume-91-no-4>
- 4 Baas, M. (ed.) 2020. *The Migration Industry in Asia: Brokerage, Gender and Precariousness*. Palgrave MacMillan: Palgrave Pivot.
- 5 Baas, M. (ed.) 2019. 'The Education-Migration Industry: International Students, Migration Policy and the Question of Skills', *International Migration* 57(3):222-234; <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12540>
- 6 Liu-Farrer, G., Yeoh, B. & Baas, M. 2020. 'Social Construction of Skill: An Analytical Approach Toward the Question of Skill in Cross-Border Labour Mobilities', Introduction to a Special Issue for *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*; <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1731983>
- 7 Liu-Farrer, G. 2020. *Immigrant Japan: Mobility and Belonging in an Ethno-nationalist Society*. Cornell University Press.
- 8 Farrer, J. 2019. *International Migrants in China's Global City. The New Shanghailanders*. Routledge.
- 9 Baas, M. 2017. 'The Mobile Middle: Indian Skilled Migrants in Singapore and the 'Middle' Space In-Between Migration Categories.' *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration* 1(1):47-62; [https://doi.org/10.1386/tjtm.1.1.47\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/tjtm.1.1.47_1)
- 10 ibid. Baas & Yeow, 2019.
- 11 Baas, M. 2020. *The Asian Migrant's Body: Emotion, Gender and Sexuality*. Amsterdam University Press.
- 12 Available for free online: [http://www.mcrq.ac.in/RLS\\_Migration\\_2020/COVID-19.pdf](http://www.mcrq.ac.in/RLS_Migration_2020/COVID-19.pdf) (visited 19-05-20)