

Temporary Labour Migration in Asia: the Precarity-Transnationality Nexus

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Premise, Context

- **migrant precarity** constitutes an important element of migrant transnationality
- combined with **temporality**, migrant precarity renders agentic transnationalism “thin”
- **”thick” agentic transnationalism is to be found elsewhere....**

Context:

- applied to key migration corridors in Asia (“South South migration”)
- labour migration in Asia mostly involves low-wage work classified as low-/unskilled
- formal regulatory frameworks of international labour migration in Asia on the basis of bilateral agreements (MoUs, BLAs),
 - in the form of strictly temporary employer-tied contract migration
 - facilitated by migration industry, contested by rising migrant rights activism
 - highly gendered (size of care & domestic work)


Transnationalism ✓

- transnationalism literature's important contributions by shifting empirical attention beyond national boundaries
- 'First Wave' TN emerged as optimistic rejection of state power and assimilationist policies

Transnationalism X

- it overstates migrant agency.....
 - emphasis on migrant transnationalism, individual and diasporic agency
 - repeat migration seen as agentic
 - *but*: more diverse experiences, such as highly rigid temporary labour migration schemes well established in Asia
- ...while downplaying the relevance of state power
 - “whoever claimed that the state is ‘retreating’ has obviously never studied migration policy” (Menz 2011:257)

Temporality

- Temporary-Permanent Divide
 - this divide today most evident axis through which rights and opportunities are differentiated
 - pathways to permanency are narrowing
 - resurgence of TLM schemes
-  *governing logic of temporality justified by linking it to development*

Migration-Development Nexus

- **Proponents of positive link between migration and development:**
 - TL migrants depicted as “agents “of (their own) development
 - emphasis on empowering effects
 - agenda by global policymaking institutions and processes cementing narratives of migrant agency as integral to transnationalism

Consequences for Study of TN

- web of restrictions to rights and conditions of migrants
- temporality intertwined with structural vulnerabilities
 - = *migrant transnationalism not (always) an alternative strategy to assimilation*
 - = *instead, a signifier of absence of choice*
- overlapping forms of discrimination amplify disempowering effects of temporality
- = multiple forms of *precarity*

Precurity

- Migrant precarity under TLM schemes in Asia extends beyond the world of work
 - costs of migration, transnationally split families (“left behind”, displaced care)
- Restrictive migration governance frameworks sustained by an array of institutions that facilitate the labour supply process
 - hence, migration governance inseparable from economic governance
 - » steady supply of ‘cheap, docile, disposable labour’

Temporality-Precarity Nexus

- TLM as an extreme form of labour market segmentation
- explored/analysed in this paper via
 - (1) migrant ambitions and
 - (2) institutional networks of two types:
 - Deepening
 - Countering, resisting

Migrant Ambitions

- Earning a wage is key for most migrants
- Access to wage earning opportunities and retaining those for as long as possible
- This necessitates a state of “permanent temporariness”
 - scope of migrant ambition reduced
 - as a result, cross-border activities collapse into a “thin” transnationalism
 - location of a “thicker” transnational activity: among institutional actors.....

Transnational institutions

- **Thicker transnational activity by:**
 - 1. *reinforcing* institutional actors
 - 2. *contesting* institutional actors

- 1) “migration systems” (Goss/Lindquist) ,
“migration intermediaries” (Xiang/Lindquist)
 - meso level capacity and dynamism
 - networked recruitment agents, brokers, middlemen
- 2) political networks, tn advocacy networks

Reinforcing Institutions

- Bilateral intergovernmental mechanisms (BLA, MoUs) provide formal framework that institutional actors operate within
 - key aspect of “managed migration” policies that promote TLM
 - accord. to research: implementation failure, no rights base, gender-insensitive/non-responsive
 - = “buyer’s market” characterised by lopsided bargaining power
 - = lower rungs of international supply, labour and care chains located in countries with weak institutions and large, unprotected workforce

Contesting Institutions

- **Efforts to organise marginal workers from the 'bottom up' via new methods of labour activism**
- **Expressions of political agency via transnational advocacy networks in attempt to address structural constraints, lack of individual capacity and institutional failure**

Contesting Institutions

- Significant role of grassroots organisations (in light of limited space for and capacity of unions)
 - **political empowerment through self-organising**
- Asian leadership in regional networking with global reach
- message from these networks: TLM is a livelihood strategy in which choice and agency are often absent starting from pre-departure, through foreign employment to return (*“protracted precarity”*)
- yet, absence of sustained or frequent militancy or radicalism (Briones 2009)

Conclusion

- Asia's major sub-regional migration corridors an empirical context in which virtues of migrant agency are less readily extolled
- Yet, this “thin” agentic transnationalism supplemented by “thick” institutional, collective transnationalism
- Policy message:
 - greater focus on ‘decent work’ rather than ‘regular’ migration
 - fair wages and working conditions; gender responsiveness
 - greater freedom of mobility to be supplemented by freedom of association