

Transnational Migration and Work in Asia. Kevin Hewison and Ken Young, eds., (Book Review)

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Abstract:

A Review of *Transnational Migration and Work in Asia* edited by Kevin Hewison and Ken Young.

Keywords: Book Review | Globalization | Worker Migration | Labor Studies | Asia

Article:

Kevin Hewison and Ken Young, eds., *Transnational Migration and Work in Asia*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006. xii and 238 pp., figures, tables, index. \$180.

The process of globalization resulted in the creation of many international networks of labor migrants. Leaving home to work in another country consequently became a feature of life in many countries. The majority of migrant workers traveled abroad with lower levels of “human” and “social” capital than native-born citizens in the destination countries, which placed them at a disadvantage in the labor market. International labor migration thus created a global underclass with limited opportunities for upward mobility, limited access to social and political institutions, and transnational ties that pose a challenge to the concepts of nation, citizenship, representative democracy, and universal rights.

While there are a plethora of studies on migration flows to core nations (the United States, Germany, France, England, etc.), far less has been written on transnational migration in Asia. Most of what can be found in the literature focuses on labor migrants from the Philippines who are working in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. Filipinos represent one of the largest flows of laborers in the world; other migrants are largely ignored in the region. In their edited collection of cross-disciplinary case studies entitled *Transnational Migration and Work in Asia*, Hewison and Young document migration flows to Thailand, Indonesia, China, Macau, Hong Kong, Burma, Laos, and other countries. The book draws upon a variety of frames (labor studies, economics, demography, human geography, and sociology) to present a comprehensive understanding of transnational migration in the region.

The book is organized into three parts, beginning with general information about the historical and structural causes of migration in Asia, then moving to individual case studies focusing on

recounting the conditions of everyday life for migrants, and finally concluding with a review of the impact of migration flows on home countries and workers' rights. After their brief introduction and overview, the editors turn in "Part 1: Globalization and Migration" to a description of the magnitude of migration in the region and its roots in the reorganization of global production into international supply chains that require a constant supply of low-wage workers, mostly from rural areas. In Chapter 2, Young points out the role that governmental policies, as well as traditional cultural and social institutions, have had in constraining imported female laborers in particular. He notes that kinship roles as much as international agreements have restricted freedoms and limit rights for women who work as domestics in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Chapter 3, Vickers observes that international migration is an extension of the historic process of urbanization and displacement from rural areas. He notes that the distinction between internal and international migration is slight and that focus should be made on "'mobility' between related sites and social positions" (p. 37).

The editors then provide a survey of the diversity of migration flows occurring in the region in "Part 2: Migrant Workers, Trafficking and the State." In this section Hewison and Young select readings that emphasize the importance of historical linkages, economic relations, and social ties between countries and that provide a status report on the conditions of life for migrants. Each of the cases in this part provides empirical evidence from recent studies of often unnoticed migration flows. They begin, in Chapter 4, with a study by Thongyou and Ayuwat that examines the importance of transnational social ties among Lao migrant workers residing in Thailand. This study notes that social networks "assist [Lao workers] to cross the border, find or arrange employment, remit parts of their earnings and is expected to support their return" (p. 72). In Chapter 5, Loveband finds that Indonesian domestic workers in Taiwan are dehumanized, essentialized, and commodified by labor brokers, who marketed them in a "process of ethnicization" that plays on stereotypical qualities that they are alleged to possess according to their nationality (p. 86). In the following chapter, Hewison reports the findings from 50 interviews with Thai domestic workers in Hong Kong, observing that while they report being "reasonably satisfied with their working and living conditions" they are aware of their "low status" and "do not feel respected" by the host society (p. 105). Similarly, in Chapter 7 Frost recounts the experience of another small migrant population of 267 Nepalese construction workers living in Hong Kong. Unlike other migrants, the majority interviewed for his study obtained legal status within the former British colony by a birthright from their fathers who were once Ghurkha soldiers stationed on the island. Emerton and Peterson follow with Chapter 8, comparing Filipinas in Hong Kong who work as domestics as distinct from those working as nightclub hostesses, many of the latter being lured by the promise of easy earnings only to be sexually exploited and to live in restrictive conditions.

Migration for factory work is then explained in the last two chapters of Part II. After briefly recounting the history of Macao, Choi explains in Chapter 9 how the island nation came to be a migrant destination as it developed an export manufacturing market in 1980s but lacked sufficient cheap labor in the local market to supply the factories. Macao tightly controls the importation of laborers, although it has yielded at times to the demands of factories and small businesses, making it easier for them to bring in workers from abroad. Changes in policy over the past few years have resulting in an increased number of Chinese domestic workers who have been brought in to relieve local women of domestic work, further boosting women's labor force

participation rates. In Chapter 10, Arnold and Hewison frame the issues facing migrants in Thailand as resulting from the global supply chain that required constantly cheaper products and thus cheaper supplies of labor. Low-paid Burmese workers (mostly teenage girls and young women) are recruited to work in textiles and garment industries in Mae Sot, Thailand, manufacturing items for Tommy Hilfiger and other international brands. The chapter includes an overview of the difficulties faced by the NGO community working for the betterment of conditions for the Burmese and other laborers.

“Part 3: Issues in Policy-Making about Migrant Labor” turns to a review of the impact of migration in the region in terms of migrant reintegration and erosion of labor rights. While both concluding chapters draw specifically upon studies of Philippine labor migrations, their findings are applicable to most migrant flows in the region. First, in Chapter 11, Weekly examines various programs instituted to encourage the reintegration of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) returning home, designed to encourage OFWs to save their earnings, remit less to families while abroad, and then plan for investment of their savings in microeconomic enterprises. While this strategy has been encouraged by a number of NGOs, there has been little real evidence of success. Weekly attributes the problem with micro-investment schemes as strategies for development to a disconnect between the greater socio-economic issues facing the Philippines and the fact that these programs attempt to provide “individualistic solutions to structural problems” (p. 193).

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Ball and Piper study the regional responses to migrant labor issues. They explain that there has been a “reluctance to discuss labor migration issues as transborder or regional phenomena” (p. 220), resulting in a disjointed and haphazard application of international labor codes and human rights treaties. Ball and Piper argue that transnational NGOs have provided the most consistency in developing regional solutions to labor issues, whereas sending countries have been “good on rhetoric of safeguarding workers, but poor on translating pronouncements into policy,” and receiving locations show little “willingness to protect migrant labor” (p. 229).

By collecting this material into a single volume, *Transnational Migration and Work in Asia* expands the discourse on global labor migration to include overlooked movements between the peripheral and semi-peripheral nations of Asia without excluding the importance of Philippine labor migration in the region. As the editors explain, the goal of the volume was to “contextualize recent labor flows in terms of history, gender, and cultural landscape” (p.2). In doing so, the book has provided an overview of the complex international industry of employers, recruiters, labor brokers, non-governmental and governmental agencies, and national and international policies that control the flow of migrants in Asia.

The editors highlight the fact that migration is a regional as well as a global phenomenon. They also note that in Asia migration flows are not a binational phenomenon but often occur in a chain or “serial” fashion. Migrants from one country replace the lost labor of those who leave to seek higher wages in a third country. Moreover, the text addresses marginalization of many laborers and recognizes the feminization of Asian labor migration by focusing on issues such as the rights of domestic workers, the problems of human trafficking, and the exploitation of those working in factories that are a part of the global supply chain. As such, this book should be highly useful not

only to scholars of Asian Studies in general, but to social scientists as well as lay people involved in NGOs addressing issues related to global migration, labor rights, and gender and development.