

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FROM THIS  
PRESENTATION WITHOUT THE  
AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

# Studying transient migrations in Asia: opportunities and challenges

Brenda S.A. Yeoh  
National University of  
Singapore

---

*Asian Population Forum: Future*

*Directions of Asian Population Research*

*Asian Demographic Research Institute (ADRI)*

*Shanghai, 10-12 October 2016*

# Asian Migrations

---

Current Trends

# Increased temporary migration

Traditional migration research has privileged **more permanent forms of migration and issues of settlement, adaptation and assimilation** in host societies.

Time-space compression brought about by rapid advancements in transport and communication technologies, as well as the flexibilisation of contemporary life and work cultures under neoliberal capitalist conditions, are moving the focus to more **temporary modes of migration**, particularly in the Asian context.

More people are moving temporarily, **sojourning in different places with the possibility of returning to their countries of origin**


- Circulation of transnational elites (professional, managerial, entrepreneurial workers) from global city to global city
- Contract workers hired under temporary foreign labour schemes, moving where work may be found
- Commuting and border crossings on daily, weekly and other short-term basis



# Increased temporary migration

---

- Migration as a household livelihood strategy or a pathway expressing personal aspiration is now within reach of an increasingly **broad spectrum of socio-economic classes** – professional and managerial elites, contract workers, undocumented migrants, student migrants, marriage migrants, retirement or lifestyle migrants, frequent flyers.



# Increased temporary migration and transnational circuits

---

- Labour migration often does not signal permanent departure, but forms a part of circular migration based on the formation of **interactive transnational households linked by to-and-fro movements of people and circuits of remittances, commodities, care and emotions.**
- **Permanent temporariness** fostered by migration regimes in host societies which treat migrant workers as disposable labour governed through ‘revolving door’ policies rather than socio-political subjects with rights to family formation and integration.

# Migration regulatory regimes

- Even as migration increases in volume and speed, migration regulatory regimes become more complex
- Role of the **state** in controlling the migration process has become more extensive
- Role of the **migration industry** in facilitating mobility has also grown but attracted less attention: ‘the black box of migration’ (Lindquist, et al. 2012).



# Tightening of migration laws and institutional structures and the rise of the migration industry

- More restrictive migration regimes in reaction to terrorism, in contradistinction to the increasingly open flow of goods, capital and FDIs.
- Irregular and clandestine migration growing dramatically as a consequence.

# Role of the State

---

- **Immigration controls** to regulate migration flows e.g. border controls (e.g. visa requirements) to regulate differentiated entry and length of stay, deportation of ‘illegal’ migrants, etc.
- Growing demands for **documentation** (e.g. visas, biometric passports)





# Role of the Migration Industry

---

- Development of flexible labour markets characterized by sub-contracting and the **privatization of migration management** to bridge the ‘space’ between the state and the migrant. In this context,
  - a wide range of **institutionalized practices**—such as medical checkups, surveillance systems, temporary housing, training, transportation, and the production of documents—form the basis for contemporary flows of migration.
  - A wide range of **actors** make their livelihoods by organising and facilitating movement of people across borders: labour recruiters, brokers, lawyers who give advice on immigration law, human smugglers, etc.



# Increasing feminisation of migration

- Feminisation of migration as women take an increasingly prominent part in contract labour systems.
- Increase demand for labour in the service and entertainment industry in the Middle East and in Asia.
- Women now comprise the majority of migrant workers legally deployed from the Philippines and Indonesia, of which most are employed as workers in the domestic, care and entertainment sectors.

# Increasing feminisation of migration

---

- **New ‘feminised’ streams of labour migration** have evolved, in response to changing production and reproduction processes worldwide predicated on a gendered division of labour.
- Production activities relocated from core economies to the periphery to take advantage of cheaper input costs draw on pre-existing gender relations and target **cheap and flexible female workers to work in the ‘global assembly line’ in export processing zones and industrial parks.**
- Creation of a pool of migrant **“factory daughters”** (Wolf 1992, Ong 1987, Salaff 1994).



# Increasing feminisation of migration

- The other, numerically more important form of female labour migration is linked to reproductive activities, such as domestic service, care work and the sex industry (Constable 1997; Huang, Yeoh and Rahman 2005).
- Women migrating for overseas jobs as paid domestic workers and careworkers as a result of the intensification of the ‘care deficit’ (Hochschild, 1995) in advanced industrialized countries where reproductive labour is being shifted from the household to the market.
- Also more women migrating to work as ‘entertainers’ or sex workers in response to the expansion of hospitality and sexual services as male executives and entrepreneurs become more mobile.

# Increasing feminisation of migration



- 
- Another significant category in terms of migratory flows in the region is constituted by the growing numbers of **female marriage migrants** from developing countries who have become an increasingly notable presence in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia (Piper and Roces 2003).



# Transient Migration and Intra-Household Dynamics in Source Communities

---

Brief Example from CHAMPSEA



# Temporary Migration Regime and Transnationalising the Family: ‘Who Cares?’

---

- **Temporary migration regimes** prevalent in many parts of Asia
  - sustained by **transnational family strategies** where (ironically) the family splits up in order to maintain the project of ‘doing family’.
- **Reproductive work** to sustain the family is relegated to the domain of source communities and “left-behind” family members.
- **“Who Cares?” at the Southernmost End of the Care Chain**
  - Important question that has attracted less attention compared to the large body of work on migrants themselves and the politics of carework at the Northern end of the care chain.

# Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA)



- **Mixed-method study investigating the impacts of parental migration on child health and well-being in Southeast Asia.**
- **Quantitative Surveys (2008)**
  - ❖ 1,034 Indonesian (East and West Java) and 1,000 Filipino (Laguna and Bulacan) households with at least one index child in one of two age groups: **3, 4 and 5 year olds** (young children) or **9, 10 and 11 year olds** (older children).
  - ❖ Left-behind responsible adults, carers and their young charges in source communities with high levels of out-migration were surveyed.
  - ❖ Transnational and non-migrant households surveyed in roughly equal proportions.
- **Qualitative interviews (2009 to 2012) from the same pool of households**
  - ❖ In-depth interviews with 52 Indonesian and 48 Filipino carers
  - ❖ Semi-structured interviews with 32 older children (16 from each country)
  - ❖ Additional 20 interviews with the key members of return-migrant households, namely return-migrants, left-behind carers and older children.





# CHAMPSEA Example

---

- With the development of a **new regime of mobility for women as breadwinners**,
- How has care work been (re)distributed in the migrant-mother's absence?
- How has gender roles and subjectivities of left-behind fathers been reworked in the wake of mothers' migration?



# Care arrangements when mothers migrate


- When mothers become overseas breadwinners, care arrangements for the children featured a larger **proportion of non-parental, mainly female carers** (31.1% in Indonesia and 35.1% in the Philippines), although the **majority were taken care of by their fathers** (67.9% in Indonesia and 59.6% in the Philippines).

# When mothers migrate ...

The migration of mothers, in contrast to the migration of fathers, reveal a more **diversified model of care** that requires greater household adjustments.

- **Left-behind fathers**

- Do **take over at least some of the absent mothers' task of nurturing and caregiving** despite being previously portrayed as truant fathers who shun nurturing roles.
- But they perform care differently from mothers as they usually hang on to some form of **paid work** outside the home
- Often assume caregiving with the **assistance of other family members** such as older children and/or other female relatives.
- Expect the **reversed household division of labour to be temporary**.
- Lessen feelings of inadequacy by **reconstructing and reclaiming masculine identities** built on characteristics such as **adaptability, capability and responsibility as part of the 'package deal'**.



# In the wake of the feminization of labour migration in Southeast Asia

---

- **Household division of labour** is under pressure to **change** and **normative gender practices of care** are in flux
- Care of left-behind children takes the form of a **web of care**
- **Gender ideologies** around parenthood and care remain **resilient but flexible** at the southernmost end of the care chain.
- In the short term, **‘doing family’** appears to trump ‘doing gender’, at least during the liminal times of transnational migration.



# Transient Migration and the Politics of Integration in Host Communities

---

Brief Example from Singapore



# Traditional models based on assimilation, acculturation and settlement


- In European and North American countries where migrants can and do make a **permanent home**, the host country's policies usually aim to develop a sense of belonging and integration among immigrants.
- Models based on notions of **assimilation, acculturation and settlement** are often predicated on measuring the level of integration by comparing the performance of immigrants with nationals in terms of social, economic, and political incorporation (Papademetriou et al., 2009).
- **Social integration** is often defined in terms of interactions with the native host country population, and the development of a national identity among immigrants (Gilkinson and Sauve, 2010).



# Temporary migrants on labour contracts

---

- In many **Asian countries**, traditional immigration and settlement is out of the question for a vast majority of labour migrants, regardless of the time they may have been living there.
- Migrant workers are not expected to settle down or stay for an indefinite period of time or to raise their families there, or become socially incorporated into the society.
- Once the worker's contract ends and is not renewed, he/she must leave the country.



# The politics of (non)incorporation in Singapore

---

In Singapore, migrants are differentially incorporated into the nation-state along bifurcated lines:

- ❖ talent migrants (i.e. highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs) are incentivized to take up permanent residency or citizenship and lay down roots.
- ❖ labour migrants, particularly those considered unskilled or performing 3D jobs, are locked into a “rotating-door” regime that enforces transience.



# Migrant concentrations in the global city-state

---



Little India  
in Singapore

- ❖ For the vast majority of lowly paid migrant workers who are admitted into the city as transient and disposable labour, **pathways to residency and citizenship are not available.**
- ❖ While the individual migrant's presence is expected to be temporary, '**migrant concentrations**' have become permanent fixtures in many cities, raising social anxieties and moral panics which in turn feed the need to tighten **control and surveillance** to keep these populations out of sight.

# Control and Containment

- ▶ Weekend enclaves and foreign worker gatherings are often viewed negatively or with unease and authorities asked to step up security measures or relocate these workers to out-of-sight locations such as offshore islands.
- ▶ Residents of public housing flats located in Little India have put up steel barricades around their blocks to keep foreign workers out.

# Little India Riot in 2013

- On 8 Dec 2013, a riot in Little India involving foreign workers broke out after a male Indian national (construction worker) died after being hit by a bus ferrying workers back to their dormitories. Angry mobs of passers-by attacked the bus and emergency vehicles. Some 300 migrant workers were involved in the riot lasting 2 hours.
  - A **Committee of Inquiry (COI)** identified three factors contributing to the riot:
    - Misunderstandings about the accident and response;
    - The culture and psychology of the crowd;
    - Alcohol and intoxication.
  - **Public debates**
    - Overcrowding and large numbers of foreign workers
    - Increasing ethnic tensions
    - Working conditions of foreign workers
    - Living conditions in the workmen's dormitories
  - **Aftermath**
    - Little India as a 'space of exception': Banning of alcohol sales in Little India; increased police surveillance
    - Increase 'spaces of enclosure' (dormitories with facilities) to contain migrant population
-

# Strategies of Containment

---

## **Cinema, cricket field at biggest dormitory (Straits Times Sunday, Aug 10, 2014)**

- When a new mega-dormitory at Tuas South Avenue 1 opens its doors at the end of this month, it will not just be Singapore's biggest, but also the first integrated facility of its kind. The 16,800-bed complex will not just have a minimart, beer garden and foodcourt, but will offer recreational options, including a 250-seat cinema and a cricket field, within its 8.4ha compound....



# Care and Cosmopolitan Hope

---

In recent years, the rights and welfare of migrant workers have been one of the leading edges in progressive developments within the civil society landscape in Singapore.



# Care and Cosmopolitan Hope

- 
- Of catalytic effect was the growing sense of dismay and outrage – starting with those within the women’s movement who were already concerned about violence against women – at what appeared to be inadequate state action and public apathy in the face of an increasing incidence of ‘maid abuse’ (Yeoh and Annadurai, 2008).

# Care and Cosmopolitan Hope

---

- A broad range of NGOs focusing on migrant labour has since emerged, including mainly **service-oriented groups** offering helplines, soup kitchens, temporary shelters, and skills training centres; and a smaller number of **advocacy-oriented groups**.
- Example: Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2)

# Conclusion

---

- Contemporary migrations in and out of Asia, by and large do not take the form of permanent ruptures, uprooting and settlement, but are more likely to be **transient and complex**, ridden with disruptions, detours, multi-destinations, and are founded on interconnections and multiple chains of movement.
- The growing scholarship on temporary migrations in Asia as part of population studies needs to deal with many **new challenges**.
- **Two lines of inquiry** include:
  - temporary contract-based migration and intra-household dynamics in source communities;
  - the (non-)incorporation of transient migrant populations in host societies.



**Thank you for your  
attention!**

