

Shaping Mobile Worlds in Asia: Human and Nonhuman Socialities

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**Kelvin E.Y. Low¹, Noorman Abdullah¹,
and Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho¹**

Abstract

In these difficult, pressing and uncertain times, migration and mobility in Asia have been incorporated into the projects of state institutions, media and a range of civil society actors. These agendas engender and shape debates that include belonging and exclusion; social mobility and inequality; conflict, violence and persecution; economic growth and labor market outcomes; state regulation, governance and governmentality; as well as diversity and innovation. Where migratory flows and mobility are advancing significant economic, social, political, environmental and ethical concerns, it becomes imperative for us to rethink and unpack these core concepts in creative and multidisciplinary ways. To do so, we assemble a group of scholars from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and geography who work on a variety of topics related to migration studies, sensory scholarship, anthropology of documents, religion, knowledge mobilities, citizenship, and education. Various case studies to be featured in this special issue include Timor Leste, Singapore, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, and Taiwan. Collectively the authors critically consider the centrality of both human and non-human actors in constituting the different types, degree, and scales of migration and mobility. The articles in this collection engage with how people, objects, things, deities, discourses, and knowledge move across the different and multiple pathways that constitute everyday life in Asia, the shared regional focus of our various research projects. The collection further elicits the connectivities (or entanglements) and comparisons evinced in our individual research, and collectively, with the goal of critically revisiting and reworking our conceptual toolkits and methodologies.

Keywords

mobile worlds, Asia, mobilities, human and nonhuman socialities

¹National University of Singapore, Singapore

Corresponding Author:

Kelvin E.Y. Low, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link ASI #03-06, FASS 117570, Singapore.

Email: socleyk@nus.edu.sg

In today's milieu when migration and mobility are advancing significant economic, social, political, environmental, and ethical concerns, it becomes imperative for researchers to rethink and unpack these core concepts in creative and multidisciplinary ways. This special issue contains articles from a workshop held at the National University of Singapore in 2019, initiated by the *Shaping Asia Network* based in German and Asian universities.¹ We consider the centrality of both human and nonhuman actors in constituting migration and mobility. The articles engage with how people, objects, deities, discourses, and knowledge move across multiple pathways that constitute everyday life in Asia. The collection further elicits the connectivities (or entanglements) and, where appropriate, comparisons evinced in our individual research and collectively.

The articles dovetail at and contribute to three intersecting lines of inquiry:

1. Who and what moves or travels? What methodological and theoretical toolkits can we deploy to comprehend analogous mobile worlds in Asia, and how we shape our analytical comprehension of them through different disciplinary standpoints?
2. How can we analyze mobilities both as movement and as sociocultural constructions of experiences, negotiations, and contentions (Cresswell, 2006; Jensen, 2009)?
3. What are the structures and institutions that facilitate and impede possibilities of mobility over a range of nation-states, social groupings, and border controls that either renew or rework human-human and human-nonhuman socialities?

We take Asia as a temporal and empirical context for broader conceptual engagement and extrapolation on notions of mobility and travelling. In doing so, we further employ "mobile worlds" (Sheller & Urry, 2003) as a heuristic concept that encapsulates four core analytical thrusts: (1) Asia as a site of method and theory, (2) human-nonhuman socialities, (3) connectivities, and (4) comparisons.

First, our approach locates Asia as a hub where multiple and complex sociocultural logics of mobility are found both in inter- and intra-Asian encounters. While scholarship on mobilities and immobilities on Asian societies have recently garnered traction (Collins, 2011; Fong et al., 2016; Vasantkumar, 2014; Whittaker & Leng, 2016), we seek to deepen and broaden such inquiry and take Asia not merely as a geographic region but as a site of theory (Sinha, 2003; Yue, 2017) and method (Chen, 2010). The aim is to "evade the constraints of Western academic ethnocentrism" (Clarsen & Mom, 2014, p. 2) and draw on perspectives from and on Asia as our broader enterprise.

Our second analytical thrust extends investigation on the "sociality of living things' species" (Tsing, 2014, pp. 28-29) to human-nonhuman socialities. We incorporate analyses of nonhuman actants (Latour, 1996) including the senses, documents, deities, and epistemic knowledges. Doing so amplifies the mobilities paradigm by gathering "new empirical sensitivities, analytical orientations and methods" (Büscher et al., 2011, p. 1), and illuminating their impacts on power relations, knowledge transfers, and contours of inclusion and exclusion. Human-nonhuman socialities are relational assemblages of "highly meaningful social practices that make up social, cultural and

political life” (Adey et al., 2014, p. 3), and which append crucially to processes of social ordering (Law, 2009).

Third, we underscore the imperative to move beyond and across the borders of disciplinary and conceptual entities to elucidate the multilateral processes of migration and mobility through threads of connectivity (Marsden & Henig, 2019). Connectivities pertain to relations and processes that link diverse societal entities such as social institutions, material objects, and forms of knowledge and processes, denoting a focus on inter- and multicultural formations. Connectivities also delve into ruptures, antagonisms, and slippages, leading to disconnectivities. Finally, comparisons are important elements of knowledge production that challenge us to critically rework our conceptual toolkits in unravelling relationalities. Comparisons instigate change and reflection at three levels, that is, how comparisons shape sociocultural processes; how scholarly projects observing such processes are driven by the comparative approach; and how they would profit from engaging in comparisons at the level of the transregional and beyond.

The first two articles, by Pfaff-Czarnicka and Ho, render comparative insights on the institutionalized aspects of international student mobility and on diaspora strategies, respectively. Their articles discuss how state, university, cultural, and other institutions leverage on migration and mobility to advance national agendas. Low and Abdullah’s article on sensory politics in Singapore and Nursyazwani’s article on refugee documentation in Malaysia interface state policies on migrant-citizen relations with perspectives from migrants. While Low and Abdullah excavate how olfactory and auditory mobilities shape migrant-citizen politics, Nursyazwani focuses on the materiality of identity documents. Together they demonstrate how different empirical and analytical orientations can augment our understanding of migration and mobilities.

Likewise, the article by Arumugam shows how the material and relational worship practices of the Tamil diaspora abroad connect to deities from the homeland, but also change their deific attributes and agency compared to their personas in the homeland. Continuing the theme of religion is Lee’s article on the Taiwanese Tzu Chi organization in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Other than immigrant agency, the activity of local ethnic elites and existing religious networks shape the distinct diffusion patterns and outcomes found in his comparative analysis. Maunaguru’s article draws attention to temporalities through Sri Lankan Tamil marriage migration by examining the ritual of tree planting and how this prompts a rethinking of migration and diaspora as processes. The final two articles by Hornidge et al. and Stodulka emphasize the circulatory practices and effects of knowledge exchanges with regard to sea-level change in Southeast Asian cities and educational curricula in Timor Leste, respectively. They conjunctionally demonstrate how global and/or regional knowledge connectivities are assembled and emplaced into local contexts.

By bringing into view cases drawn from different Asian societies, we embark on comparisons, not through juxtaposing countries alongside one another, but by tracing “itineracies and interconnectivities” (Chua et al., 2019) between and across places through a spectrum of human-nonhuman assemblages that shape mobile worlds across Asia. We hope to thus enhance current debates on mobilities and highlight future mobile worlds and trajectories for analyses.

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Author Biographies

Kelvin E.Y. Low is an associate professor and Deputy Head of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. His main research interests include sensory studies, migration and transnationalism, social memory, and food and foodways. He is author or editor of 4 books with the most recent being *Senses in Cities: Experiences of Urban Settings* (Routledge, 2017).

Noorman Abdullah holds a joint-appointment as Senior Lecturer at the Departments of Sociology and Malay Studies, National University of Singapore. His core research interests and publications focus primarily on religion and society, particularly in relation to spirit possession and everyday religiosity; deviance and social control; and sensory studies, with a strong empirical component grounded on ethnography, everyday life and qualitative fieldwork.

Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho is an associate professor at the Department of Geography and Senior Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Her research addresses how citizenship is changing as a result of multi-directional migration flows in the Asia-Pacific. She is author of *Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration and Re-migration Across China's Borders* (Stanford University Press, 2019).