

*Transnational Migration and Work in Asia*. Edited by Kevin Hewison and Ken Young. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. 238 pp.

Most of the chapters in this volume focus on specific migrant groups in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Thailand; the volume is a valuable contribution because it describes particular migrant situations that are usually overlooked in the study of larger migration flows. Maniemai Thongyou and Dusadee Ayuwat describe Lao migrant workers in Thailand, Anne Loveband focuses on Indonesian women in Taiwan, Kevin Hewison writes about Thai women workers in Hong Kong, Stephen Frost describes Nepalese construction workers in Hong Kong, Robyn Emerton and Carole Petersen study Filipina nightclub hostesses in Hong Kong, Alex H. Choi reviews labour migration to Macao, and Dennis Arnold and Kevin Hewison examine the situation of Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot, Thailand.

Several themes unite the narrative of the volume and make it more than a collection of small-scale studies. The first is the way in which globalization, however defined, has shaped economies and labour demand, and driven labour migration within Asia since the 1970s. Ken Young contributes a chapter on how globalization has created and met a demand for migrant labourers and domestic service workers. He and others point out that employment opportunities for middle-class women in the more advanced economies have created a demand for migrant domestic workers to perform more of the labour within the household. He notes that the flow of migrants is often “serial” in that, for example, Thai workers migrate to more developed economies elsewhere in Asia while workers from poorer neighbouring countries migrate to take up low-paying and difficult jobs in Thailand. Remittances from overseas workers are often critical to household economies and significant in the national context. Young also notes the feminization of migrant labour in Asia owing to the demand for domestic service workers and workers in light manufacturing.

Some of the chapters provide significant historical and cultural depth. Adrian Vickers describes many of the traditions of mobility

in what is now Indonesia. These have been caused by war and religious customs and, more recently, the government transmigration programme and demand for labour. He notes that in Javanese urbanization most migrants were women, as is generally true throughout East and Southeast Asia. Several of the chapters focus on migrant domestic workers, but Young's contribution interestingly places them in the context of large Chinese households that typically contain a variety of paid and unpaid workers, including relatives, bond servants, and hired servants. As the household often overlaps with the family business, household workers are used in both, a practice also noted by Loveband in Taiwan.

Another theme common to several of the chapters is the importance of networks to the migration process. These usually begin with the family and community making the decision to migrate. The actual movement is nearly always accomplished through recruitment and placement agencies. While working overseas, friendship networks often provide some protection for the migrants. In the situations described, few migrants benefit directly from government protection, and NGOs, while striving to provide services and protection, encounter many official, and other obstacles.

The most pervasive theme of this volume is the inability of governments in either source or host countries to offer significant protection to migrants. Although the concerned governments have considerable legislation and regulations in place, recruitment agencies and employers routinely circumvent the rules. Government agencies often lack the will, the mandate and the resources to enforce laws and regulations effectively.

Domestic servants lack protection largely owing to the nature of their employment. Industrial workers lack protection because governments routinely side with employers in formulating regulations governing their employment and in handling disputes.

Some chapters review the situation of female migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Thailand. Ninety per cent of Thai domestic workers in Hong Kong seem satisfied with their work and Macao has no trouble recruiting domestic workers

from mainland China. Most Lao domestic workers in Thailand also do not report significant problems, perhaps because they enjoy the support of social networks and because their language is the same as the Northeastern Thai dialect. Loveband reports that Indonesian domestic workers in Taiwan need to work 14–18 hours a day for 12–18 months to pay off debts to brokers and agents, and many have to work in the family business as well as perform household duties. Household work is not covered under the Labour Standards Law. Ethnic stereotyping channels Indonesians particularly into jobs caring for elderly or chronically ill family members. Because they are so heavily indebted upon migrating to Taiwan, they are reluctant to opt out even from abusive situations, since it would mean that they would have to return home while still in debt.

Arnold and Hewison paint a fascinating but disturbing picture of ways in which migrant workers in Mae Sot in Thailand have been integrated into global manufacturing supply chains. The Thailand Board of Investment had been promoting foreign direct investment in Mae Sot by granting tax privileges and by attracting unorganized workforce from Myanmar. Some 200 factories are located in the small town, many manufacturing textiles and garments. Migrant workers often complain about not receiving the legal minimum wage. They are not permitted to form labour unions, and employers usually retain their work permits, which violates regulations. Their work permits are for a specific employer so if they are dismissed, they are subject to arrest and deportation as illegal migrants. NGOs attempting to assist migrants are harassed, and NGOs and workers perceive the police and the provincial labour office as siding with employers when there are disputes. Still, migrant workers are plentiful because political conflicts and the lack of employment opportunities in Myanmar do not offer them viable alternatives.

Rochelle Ball and Nicola Piper examine these issues from a regional perspective. They note that regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have not shown any interest in tackling issues associated with international migration. The numerous other regional consultation processes that exist are non-binding.

APEC, for example, stresses that it relies on government–private sector partnership, and so offers little protection to workers.

The Government of the Philippines has done more than other governments in the region to protect its workers. However, receiving countries are often reluctant to sign bilateral agreements on labour migration. Because so many Filipinos work overseas, that country’s embassies find it difficult to provide adequate services. In Japan, for example, there are 26,000 Filipino workers per labour and welfare officer assigned there.

In many countries, migrants are not permitted to form labour unions and local unions often oppose the interests of migrants. Ball and Piper conclude that NGOs are best placed to protect the interests of migrant workers and that it is essential for the NGOs, as well as labour unions and others interested in migrant rights, to organize trans-nationally. This line of argument underestimates the potential in international agreements and national legislation with regards to the protection of migrants, in that such instruments do set norms and standards that NGOs can subsequently demand to be upheld.

The strength of this work lies in its rare micro-studies of specific migration flows that are rarely studied. In some ways, however, these are also its drawbacks. The samples of migrants obtained are often small and probably biased toward migrants easily identified and available for interviews. Clearly it is difficult to locate and interview migrants who are in the most vulnerable situations. The authors generally do not adequately address the impact of their methodology on their findings. Recent large studies on migrant domestic workers in Thailand carried out by Mahidol University, for example, yield a much less sanguine view of the situation of those workers than does the paper in this volume.

As useful as this volume is, it does not live up to its suggestion that it is about “... *Work in Asia*”. In fact, it is limited to only some parts of East and Southeast Asia, with no chapter on South Asia or specifically on China, Japan, the Republic of Korea or even Malaysia. One chapter refers to “the Asia-Pacific” but does not mention any Pacific islands, unless it means to include the Philippines and Taiwan

in that category. As approximately 10 per cent of the population and 20 per cent of the labour force of the Philippines is working overseas, it would have been of value to examine in detail that country's policies concerning promotion of overseas employment, treatment of remittances (partially covered in an interesting chapter by Kathleen Weekley), human resources development, and general development.

Despite these caveats, this is a book that migration scholars will enjoy reading and it provides chapters that can be useful in a wide range of university courses.

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