CONFERENCE REPORT

Rethinking Intimate Labor through Inter-Asian Migrations: Insights from the 2011 Bellagio Conference*

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Over the past quarter of a century, women and men have migrated with greater frequency within Asia as the continent increasingly plays host to major im/

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migration sending and receiving countries. Countries across the region are grappling with powerful economic changes that have produced booming economies in some areas and severe economic pressures in others. These material disparities are coupled with radically divergent population trends as Asia includes countries with the world’s lowest birth rates and those with the largest populations. The convergence of these disparate trends has generated richly varied forms of migration and immigration, the preponderance of which involves some type of intimate labor, whether domestic and care work, sex work, or marriage. Intimate labor underscores the bodily, emotional, gendered, and sometimes invisible dimensions of labor that forges and sustains families, interpersonal relations, class statuses, household life, and the integrity and dignity of those in need of care. While wealthier parts of Asia increasingly depend on migrants to perform this intimate labor, poorer regions face their own “care deficit” as growing numbers of women migrate abroad. Hence, these intimate labor migrations require new efforts to understand cross-border movement, intimate life, family relations, and gendered labor in an increasingly mobile Asian context.

This conference, held 6-10 June 2011 at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center in Bellagio, Italy, addressed this need by bringing together academics and NGO practitioners who have worked on the ground with migrants engaged in diverse forms of intimate labor across East, Southeast, and South Asia and the Gulf. Conference presentations combined detailed ethnographic analysis reflecting the diversity of intimate labor migration experiences with theoretical and policy debates that complicate existing narratives about “Asian migration” and expose the varied intersections of nationality, class, religion, sexuality, and gender emerging in domestic and public spaces across Asia. The conference offered an important setting in which to share research and enhance our understanding of how specific cultural formulations of family, nation, and inequality emerge in diverse Asian contexts and how they influence migratory experiences and regulations. These conversations deepened our appreciation for the importance of migrant organizing and empowerment, and created a foundation for future efforts to strengthen organizing connections across Asia.

The conference built on recent calls to treat migration flows as inherently gendered, sexualized, and racialized processes. Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality shape the subjective identities and experiences of both male and female migrants, and they influence national migration and population policies and societal responses to migration in sending and receiving

In their recent volume, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas succinctly define intimate labor as “work that involves embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction.”
countries. Through specific attention to different forms of intimate labor, the conference deepened the impact of this analytic approach by examining precisely how diverse types of migration and migration experiences have re-configured gender, sexuality, and race in these contexts, and how those configurations have changed across inter-Asian migratory circuits. These comparative insights shed light on the impact of different government policies regulating migrants in sending and receiving countries, different political systems and their responses to NGO activism, and different models of nationality and citizenship in countries across the region.

The conference also explored questions of how to define “labor” and what distinguishes “productive” from “reproductive” labor in immigration contexts. When labor takes place in domestic spaces or intimate relationships, it often is redefined as non-labor or reproductive caretaking. This devaluation of intimate labor exposes im/migrants to lower pay and labor abuses, subjects them to greater state regulation of their intimate relationships, and often bars them from legal protections and rights. Moreover, the productive/reproductive distinction fails to explain how migrants choose and move between forms of intimate labor, including both explicitly commodified work as domestics or sex workers and the ostensibly non-commodified sexual, care, and household labor performed by wives and mothers. By examining discrepancies between “laboring” as defined by law and im/migrants’ own experiences of intimate labor, the conference assessed how definitions of labor structure access to legal rights and NGO support. Drawing on key ethnographic insights, participants also challenged the artificial divide between “forced” and “voluntary” labor/migration that has dominated international trafficking policies and debates about gendered migration and coercive labor in Asia.

By questioning these prevailing dichotomies, conference participants interrogated dominant formulations of cross-border mobility and its impact on citizenship norms and national identities. Asian countries evidence diverse concerns about national populations: anxieties about demographic purity and the “quality” of the population, fears of excessive population growth or below-replacement birth rates, and worries about rapid population aging or high rates of out-migration. State efforts to “manage” populations extend to the development of border controls and im/migration regulations in sending and receiving countries. Through attention to how population concerns have shaped im/migration policies and popular discourses about national identity, the conference provided important comparative insights into emerging tensions between cross-border mobility and restrictive nationality and citizenship policies.

The remainder of this report summarizes the major conclusions drawn from the conference and points to avenues for future research and activism.
Neoliberalism, Global Inequality and Policy Regimes

By examining migratory intimate labor in an inter-Asian context, we can begin to understand how neoliberal economic and political forces have reshaped worldviews, subjectivities, and life opportunities for people situated unequally with respect to globalizing processes tethered to post-colonial and neo-colonial capitalist systems. The complexity of cross-border migration and the social and economic hierarchies created by globalization render migrant workers (especially those engaging in intimate labor) increasingly vulnerable. Little protection is available for transnational intimate laborers under a neoliberal capitalist system that is premised on the cultivation of a flexible workforce in order to mitigate the risks of the new economic world order. Goals of profit maximization and risk management in turn fuel a global “race to the bottom” directed toward not only the production of goods, but also the employment of laboring bodies in care work and service sectors. Marked by race, class, nationality, and gender, these laboring bodies are defined by state and non-state actors as expendable because of over-supply, thereby creating a contingent class of persons whose migrant status often subjects them to policing, deportation and suspicions of criminality.

Participants examined the role of states and inter-state relations in migration policy formation and regulation, focusing in particular on how migration, welfare, and deportation regimes are operationalized across the region. States, not as monolithic entities but rather as diverse forces and actors encountered by migrants, have a vested interest in maintaining certain migration and border-control regimes. Some sending countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, are highly dependent on remittances and rely on labor export to meet the employment needs of their citizens. For these governments, protecting migrants’ rights is secondary to promoting their nationals for overseas employment. By contrast, receiving countries—such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—are invested in importing temporary workers to meet growing labor demands. As several presenters highlighted, states have increasingly failed to meet the needs of their citizens, not only by promoting and protecting their rights as workers abroad, but also by maintaining welfare regimes that would assist in the provision of care and alleviate citizens’ dependence on overseas employment to support such care. Unilateral policies seeking to protect migrant workers are not sufficient, however, and often end up increasing abuse or encouraging unauthorized migration that exposes migrants to greater risks. Instead, states should be encouraged to work cooperatively, either through regional alliances or bilateral agreements between sending and receiving countries.
Neoliberal policies resulting from the new economic world order have led to the privatization of care work (as in the Gulf), a rise in informal labor resulting from a de-regulation of work through sub-contracting (as in Japan), and the devolution of state power from government actors to intermediaries such as recruiters and brokers. In some cases this may legally bind migrants to their employers (as in the kefala system used in the Gulf), while in other instances, such as Indonesia, migrants are tied to their recruiters and brokers through community and kinship bonds. The paradoxical result is a situation in which the state seeks to regulate cross-border movement while simultaneously absenting itself from provision of care for citizens or support for migrants.

Restrictive policies implemented recently across the region have aimed to decrease or more closely regulate different forms of intimate labor migration. Many of these laws and policies, however, have had the unintended consequence of exacerbating challenges that migrant workers face in protecting themselves from abusive employers and working conditions, maintaining legal status, or achieving their migration goals. Conference attendees highlighted conflicts between policies and discourses about forced labor and trafficking on the one hand, and the lived realities of migration, on the other, to stress the differences between voices on the ground and voices of global capitalism and border security. Laws that seek to restrict the out-migration of female migrants in particular (such as in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh), ostensibly crafted to ‘protect’ women in sending countries, have had the opposite effect of rendering these women more vulnerable as they seek out informal migratory routes that may be abusive or lead to trafficking-like situations. Furthermore, the international discourse on trafficking, as well as policies generated in response to the United States’ Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), with their overemphasis on sex trafficking, have provoked intense scrutiny of all women working in the sex industry—leading to arrests and raids in the name of “rescue”—while overlooking abuses experienced by workers in other sectors. In the UAE, for instance, the global moral panic about sex trafficking overshadowed a movement towards migrants’ rights that had been coalescing since the 1990s. In the case of South Korea, trafficking policies led to a discourse about women’s human rights that was used to promote patriarchal visions of “deserving” women who were deemed eligible for state protection or the benefits of citizenship.

Several laws and policies enacted by states and operationalized through non-state actors (such as activists, brokers, and recruiters) encourage migrants to seek out creative solutions to seemingly insurmountable challenges, resulting in what conference participants identified as “bargaining in the shadow of the state.” Participants discussed the myriad ways that transnational migrants exercise agency in otherwise restrictive situations. From Filipino migrant workers who strategically abscond from their Saudi
employers and domestic workers in Kuwait who convert to Islam to demonstrate their malleability and flexibility, to immigrant spouses in Taiwan who strategize about the freedoms gained through domestic violence protection orders and migrant workers in Hong Kong who apply for asylum after giving birth to undocumented children, transnational migrants engaged in diverse forms of intimate labor can and do find creative ways to work around global, state and interstate forces that aim to control their mobility, restrict their access to legal status and rights, and limit their opportunities to improve their lives. Hence, although migrants face numerous obstacles as they prepare to migrate and after reaching their destinations, many also adopt creative strategies to realize their migration goals despite restrictive laws and policies in both sending and receiving countries.

Rethinking Intimacy and Commodification through Cross-Border Mobility

The cultural specificity of intimacy is constructed and enacted through specific kinds of relationships and practices. The conference explicitly problematized how intimacy and intimate labor are defined and recognized across Asia, examining dynamics of care, bodily contact, affect, and morality and unpacking how those dynamics infuse interpersonal relationships, sexual norms and desires, domestic spaces, and religious practices. Instead of assuming that intimacy and emotions are separate from material relations, participants asked how migration both strengthened existing processes of commodification present in intimate practices and identified commodification as a “problem” ostensibly generated by cross-border movement itself. In other words, by questioning binaries such as public/private, formal/informal, and material/emotional, participants showed how migration troubles what Vivian Zelizer has termed a “hostile worlds” approach that presumes a clear divide between intimate social bonds and economic transactions, and perceives transgressions across that divide as corrupting the essence of each sphere.

Cross-border intimacy suffuses a wide array of relationships and statuses, including spousal bonds, child- and elder-care relationships, domestic work, and sexual exchanges. Anxieties about these kinds of intimacy emerge from governmental and societal sectors, in turn shaping immigration policies, employer/employee relations, transnational familial dynamics, and migrant community formation and support. In cross-border marriages, for instance, anxieties about the authenticity and permanence of affective investments inform border control policies and couples’ own interactions and negotiations. “Moral panics” about the intimate consequences of migration experiences show how changing gender and sexual norms move with migrants, unsettling gendered family roles and exposing the vulnerability of national or class-specific family models. Stereotypes about migrant sexuality
in destination countries inspire heightened policing of sexual behavior by authorities, employers, and migrants themselves. At the same time, however, migration may give both men and women the freedom to explore instrumentality, new sexual practices, and intimate relationships.

Migration both produces and challenges dominant heteronormative discourses about family, gender roles, sexual morality, love, and religious commitment. This contradictory effect—undergirding existing norms while also producing new possibilities—exposes migrants to greater policing of their intimate lives as their everyday behavior and mobility are disciplined through state regulatory policies and familial or employer restrictions. Although these disciplinary practices reinforce hegemonic discourses about the “good” and “bad” migrant or “illegal” and “immoral” practices, nonetheless such stereotypes rarely conform to actual experience. Instead, the fluidity of migration and migrants’ own decisions expose the inevitable failure of such policing as it is unable to clearly distinguish victim from criminal, legal from illegal, or moral from immoral. As categorical boundaries become ever more difficult to fix definitively, they, in turn, inspire enhanced regulatory responses from state actors and the international community, although the efficacy of such measures remains very much in question.

Responses to the anxieties generated by rapidly growing forms of intimate labor migration also raise methodological and theoretical questions about how to define intimate life and guarantee individual and community rights to maintain those life forms. The scope of inter-Asian migration today requires us to ask who enjoys the right to an intimate life that is protected by the state without being subject to excessive state intrusion. As migration becomes a way of life for many who lack access to gainful employment in their home countries, the issue of how to protect migrants’ own intimate lives and care needs becomes more pressing. Sending countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and India now have multiple generations of migrants, and in China it is not uncommon for sisters, cousins, or mothers and daughters to migrate together through cross-border marriages. A much-needed area for future research is migrants’ own care needs and those of their family members. This topic includes care for children and elders left behind in the home country, as well as rights to care for and legalize children born in or brought to a destination country (the latter typically is an option only for marital immigrants). As more migrants themselves age, moreover, they become increasingly concerned with their own elder care and access to resources such as pensions and old-age insurance. In many instances, difficulties in transporting such resources across borders may make it even more challenging for migrants to meet their own future care needs. One possible model for the future is Japan’s pension system which entitles migrants who have paid into the pension program while working in Japan to draw their entire share after age 45, even if they have left the country.
Citizenship and National Identity

Anxieties about citizenship are at the forefront of many debates and policies concerning migration, migrants, and their families. Conference participants sought to problematize how citizenship is defined, experienced, and policed in various migratory contexts. More specifically, the conference examined the range of citizenship regimes that exist across Asia and the cultural and familial values that undergird them. Moreover, our discussions probed the relationship between legal citizenship status and more diffuse, but no less powerful, experiences of belonging, flexibility, and identity. As many countries in the region face increasingly multicultural and multiracial populations, they struggle to reconcile citizenship models premised on national “purity” with the growing diversity of those residing within national borders. In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, migrant workers from over eighty countries comprise more than 80 percent of the population, whereas in Singapore, non-residents (primarily from various parts of Asia) number 1.3 million out of a total population of five million. While most countries tightly restrict access to naturalized citizenship (especially for less skilled migrant workers), nonetheless, they have had to adjust to the changing composition of their residents. Transnational marriage flows are also transforming populations across East and Southeast Asia, with Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore adopting different approaches to multiculturalism (from active promotion to implicit denial) and growing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity within their borders.

*Jus sanguinis* (descent-based citizenship) forms the basis of citizenship regimes across much of Asia, tethered to norms of patrilineal descent that infuse naturalization laws in many countries despite recent reforms that make such laws *prima facie* gender neutral. This model generally restricts naturalized citizenship to those who can document specific kinship ties to a citizen—marital and parent-child bonds prime among them—thereby relegating most other migrants to a temporary status typically linked to employment (white-collar professionals may be granted exceptions in some countries). Marital migrants may also be treated differently based on their country of origin (as in Taiwan where Mainland Chinese and Southeast Asian spouses are subject to different laws and regulations), and their ability to transmit citizenship to parents or children from previous unions or those born outside of marriage varies significantly across the region. Childbearing by migrant workers is even more tightly regulated, and some countries, such as Singapore, subject female migrant workers to regular pregnancy tests and deport them should they become pregnant. In countries ranging from Japan and Hong Kong to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, children of migrant women face tenuous claims to legal status, resulting in cases of “floating babies” or children who do not
enjoy rights to citizenship in any country. Migrant women who reproduce in their new homes, as well as the children born to these women, may inspire moral panics about the changing composition of the national body and the threats posed by migration to ideals of national homogeneity and existing standards for inclusion and exclusion.

Citizenship is also tethered to welfare, migration, and deportation regimes, and it is at the intersection of these regimes that disconnects between policies and the lived experiences of transnational migrants can be seen most explicitly. Migrants fuel hegemonic state and societal discourses about inclusion and exclusion that police access to citizenship and legal migration status. Growing numbers with claims to residency and naturalized citizenship may also provoke fears that migrants are draining diminishing state resources through demands on welfare and health systems, as well as increasing policing costs where migrants are associated with criminality. Border crossings are key sites where inclusion and exclusion are enacted, both through evaluations of those seeking entry and through deportation protocols that aim to fix legal and illegal subjects through documentation and idealized visions of citizen and migrant bodies. Brokers may mitigate some of the uncertainty of border crossing by assisting with paperwork and identity documents, but they also increase the costs of migration and burden migrants with debts that can take years to repay. The growing movement of people across borders troubles a neat correspondence between citizen status and access to state-allocated rights and resources; at the same time, this cross-border mobility further undermines the apparent stability of citizenship and security regimes throughout the region.

Beyond legal citizenship, the question of cultural citizenship requires further research and scrutiny as many migrants find that legal citizenship is not enough to claim belonging, to have one’s own cultural resources recognized, or to feel “at home” in their new country of residence. Moreover, persistent racial, ethnic, and cultural hierarchies within and between migrant communities affect migrants’ access to cultural citizenship and their sense of belonging both at home and abroad. For some, the experience of “flexible citizenship” may also lead to a feeling of betrayal or a reduced sense of belonging to a home country or community. Indeed, mobility can often mean that a migrant’s legal status is in flux, but conference participants pointed out that migrants’ cultural citizenship was often threatened as well, leading to experiences of non-belonging or homelessness. How migrants perform belonging and construct a sense of “home,” regardless of physical location or legal standing, is tied to their affective investments in people and places, as well as to the kinds of recognition they enjoy and claim from the society around them.