Book Review: Return: Nationalising Transnational Mobility in Asia

Guest post by Brigitte Suter, a researcher at the Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (MIM). Her current project is concerned with the migration projects of European migrants in China.


Return is an intrinsic component of East Asian migration schemes. Asian economies are globalising and policies are enacted to attract foreign labour, but the issue of
retention is not foreseen. *Return: Nationalising Transnational Mobility in Asia* thus engages with a very pertinent topic. Return migrants are presented as the link between the nation and transnational circuits of mobility. Consequently, analyzing a state’s behavior towards its overseas (or already returned) population yields interesting points for the understanding of nation-building processes and a state’s positioning vis-à-vis other nation states. This is the central thesis and the point of departure of Biao Xiang, Brenda Yeoh, and Mika Toyota’s edited volume. The introduction written by Xiang presents, in a useful and coherent manner, the relevant theoretical reasoning around the returnee’s new symbolic and political significance. Laudably, it provides a structure for this collection of chapters which creates the connections needed in order to stimulate new ideas on migration, and the links to both global circuits and nation states.

While some of the contributions illuminate for the reader the subjective experiences of return and the relation to the ‘homeland,’ the primary focus of this text is on return as a subject of policy making. Return, as this book convincingly shows, is seldom a simple move from one country to the other, nor that which lays claims of belonging in one or the other form over migrants. This becomes clear as *Return* takes the reader through a valuable overview of policies towards returnees in different countries and at different times in history. Just as with other categories of migrants, the figure of the returnee is made different by historically shifting discourses and policies, and thus at a certain point in time comes to be seen as more or less desirable, as well as more or less vulnerable. The book excels at offering descriptions and analyses of a large range of relationships between the figure of the returnee and the nation. As such, the returnee appears at times and in certain contexts as the agent of reinvention of the nation, and as the privileged kin, while in other contexts the returnee is declared as the discriminated political other, or as the victim in need of protection.

This compilation consists of an introduction and eight chapters which juxtapose the experiences of Asian countries with contributions focused on Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Indian, South Korean, and Cambodian contexts. The chapters are written by an international group of scholars, all highly renowned in their respective fields. Three of the contributions look at the role of return migration in nation-building processes from a historical perspective, while the other five chapters focus on contemporary processes.

In one of the historical contributions, Koji Sasaki shows how the movement of Brazilians of Japanese descent to Japan is framed as ‘return’ when it’s politically favourable, and how the same movement is discouraged at other times. The chapter’s strength lies in both clarifying the political concepts and subjective properties of return as well as in successfully linking the two. Also from a historical perspective, Wang Cangbai explores the role of Chinese returnees from Indonesia in the making of the Chinese state as a class-based entity between 1949 and 1979. The chapter traces and analyses how the return of Chinese nationals to China was mobilized, categorized, supervised, and controlled.
In a more contemporary contribution, Sylvia Cowan looks at how Cambodians that have previously been resettled to the United States following the wars in Indochina in the 1970s are forcibly expelled post-millennia. The author convincingly points at US involvement in the conflict as a means of fighting the external enemy and at deportation as a practice revealing the inherent fear of the internal alien. As Cambodia doesn’t constitute a place of belonging for the forced returnees, these practices lead to a process of re-displacement.

In ‘Rescue, Return, in Place,’ Johan Lindquist focuses on developments in the current migration regime between Indonesia and Malaysia that simultaneously aim to regulate and protect migrants. The focus is largely on the decisive role of NGOs and media in shaping the way migrants are perceived. In this context migrants are generally portrayed as victims and return in this context signifies rescue. Lindquist argues that the strong emphasis on trafficking and protection sets aside more complicated issues that lead to exploitative situations in the first place, such as mobility and labour rights.

Turning towards a type of returnee perceived in completely different terms, Carol Upadhya addresses how Indian IT professionals returning to Bangalore after long periods in the West become agents in the transformation of India into a new civilized nation. The crucial new identity of the ‘global Indian’ they exhibit offers a starting point for Bangalore and ultimately India as a nation to negotiate and to manifest various forms of belonging: ethnically and culturally diverse and simultaneously transnational.

Return is never just a simple move, as the book editors claim in the introduction and proceed to demonstrate through the different contributions. With return migration only recently emerging as an aspect of migration studies in its own right, this edited collection provides great stimulation for generating ideas of return migration in an advanced and multifaceted way. The book is highly recommended for students of the social sciences, in particular those concerned with mobility, migration, and nation-building.

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