Presentation
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Renaud Egreteau and Julie Baujard

Electronic reference
Renaud Egreteau and Julie Baujard, « Presentation », Moussons [Online], 22 | 2013, Online since 21 November 2013, connection on 29 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/moussons/2311 ; DOI : 10.4000/moussons.2311

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Of Burmese Migrants and Cities

Coordinated by Renaud Egreteau & Julie Baujard

Extant scholarship has recognized the importance of human migration to the rise and decline of urban centers. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have focused on the complex role urban spaces play in migration and transnational practices (Smith 2001; Sassen 2001). Between the global and the local, cities are sites of complex processes of transnational mobilities. Urban spaces attract migrants who, once settled, do coexist in proximity. Over time, their interactions shape and (re)shape the urban environment in which they live (Agier 2009). They find in cities tools to mobilize; in the process they craft a new democratic “urban” space (Appadurai 2002). Transnational networking has also become a key element in the formation of a “global” city, as claimed by a now popular literature. Inter-connections and meetings between mobile communities and migrant populations give a city its dynamism and centrality, frame its contours and representations, and, in the end, mould its “urbanity.”

In this thematic section, the three articles and three research notes we have gathered draw on this literature to address the linkages between migration, urbanity, mobilization and transnationalism. In particular, the first five contributions seek to explore these inter-related concepts through the examination of migrant populations coming from Burma (Myanmar). The last study of this section explores the migration of Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers into Hong Kong, balancing the analysis of the (mis)fortunes of the Burmese migrants.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Burma has been a major pole of migration. The place attracted Chinese, Indian, European and Jewish populations in an age of colonial empire (1826-1937). But a series of forced migrations were also observed after independence in 1948. Protracted ethnic conflicts and a decade-long authoritarian rule imposed by the Burmese armed forces have pushed many Burmese communities into exile. Furthermore, chronic under-development...
has, most particularly over the past two decades, generated massive transnational flows of Burmese job-seekers throughout Asia, and beyond. Today, about four million Burmese may be living away from their homeland. Many have settled in global cities, particularly in Asia. Voluntary or forced, legal or illegal according to the local laws in force, migrants are commonly facing extreme challenges when they move towards urban and globalized worlds. Their migration—mostly out of rural worlds—may have been prompted by the sudden arrival of “modernity,” economic and social liberalism or violent political transformations.

In this section, we aim to better understand the dynamics of installation of various Burmese migrant communities in highly urbanized areas. This is to identify patterns of social and political mobilization in an urban host society. We focus on Asian urban spaces where several million inhabitants dwell: “global cities” (such as Bangkok, Tokyo, and Singapore) or cities in the process of becoming global ones (New Delhi), as well as fast growing regional capitals (Madras and Calcutta in India, Chittagong in Bangladesh). These cities concentrate vast economic capital, whose rapid growth requires an abundant and mobile workforce, often badly paid, foreign, and more or less qualified. An urban space indeed concentrates numerous social and economic resources, which a migrant commonly tries to capture. This starts with an employment opportunity. Rohingyas offer an extremely cheap labor force to the real estate and shipbuilding industries of Chittagong in Bangladesh, explains Samuel Berthet in his note. Indian returnees from Burma have found jobs in factories or local government offices thanks to a policy of reservations proposed to repatriate communities by the Indian authorities in Madras or Calcutta (Egreteau). Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers find in Hong Kong opportunities they could not dream of at home (Husson).

Urban spaces also offer specific political and social infrastructures—unknown in rural areas—which attract migrants in search of new resources. Social and political mobilization is more easily shaped in an urban context. For instance, a global city brings together the resources that the Burmese political exiles have long needed to continue their pro-democracy struggle abroad. Ethnic or diasporic organizations blossom in urban spaces where local and transnational community networks are framed and constantly expanded (Mersan). Urban dwellers benefit from Internet-enabled homes or cafés, public transport fosters the mobility of people. Windows onto the global world, cities are favored by political activists (Banki). In cities, migrant organizations hold meetings and training sessions, including on human and civil rights (Baujard), strengthen trade unionism (Egreteau), develop fundraising activities (Mersan, Husson).

Cities are nodes of transnational circulation linking homelands and hostlands. We see through these six different contributions that an urban space is a place of interaction, where migrants have the opportunity to get more familiar with the struggles of others, connect them with potential supporters and donors, as highlighted by the “refugee-apparatus” (or framework) Julie Baujard has studied in New Delhi. Cities are also the vehicle though which migrants seek to acquire a new “citizenship,” local and urban first, and then national, gradually developing
a sense of belonging to the city (Egreteau). They provide greater freedom in the (re)construction of a migrant’s social and economic life.

But cities also make uprooted people more insecure (Banki, Baujard), whether they come from rural areas or feel isolated in an unknown place, as these young Indonesian or Filipina women in Hong Kong searching emotional support, including through sexual experiences considered immoral in their homeland (Husson). A city is also a place where anonymity can prevail. A densely populated space allows the more precarious or insecure to blend in, and get lost in the crowd. There migrants can still work and mobilize despite the dangers (of arrest, deportation), as Susan Banki sheds light through the case of Burmese activists in Bangkok and Tokyo. The city is thus a place of refuge, especially for those who do not wish to be identified: illegal Rohingyas in Chittagong (Berthet) or asylum seekers without residency permit in Thailand and Japan (Banki).

To conclude this thematic section, we offer a comparative perspective with book reviews of monographs recently published on a wide range of social and political mobilization cases provided by Burmese and Southeast Asian exilic communities around the world.

Références