

Report on
International Workshop on Asian Transnational Families
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Report

This international workshop focused on the “transnational family” as an increasingly utilised form of living arrangement in which familial relations may be stretched across international borders. From the more “elite” astronaut families to those of overseas contract workers, transnational informal “networks”, remittance “flows” and “circuits” of care and affection – often facilitated by easier mobilities and communications – have emerged to connect geographically dispersed family members. Such family forms need to be understood in the context of shifting global patterns of immigration and settlement as well as a range of more fluid migrations which may be transnational, circular, or multiple.

The workshop attracted 63 participants who came together over two days to discuss transnational families in the Asian context. The 22 papers were organised into the following panels:

- Transnational Families and the Geographies of Care
- Transnational Perspectives on Marriage and Migration
- Transnational Families and Inter-generational Politics
- Transnational Families and Social Networks
- Households, Economies and Transnational Strategies
- Transnational Families, Education and Cultural Capital
- Families, Nations and Transnationalities

At the end of the workshop, all participants came together to discuss how the various papers had contributed to our understanding of “Asian transnational families”.

“Asian”

While there were few firm conclusions thrown up at the end of the two days, the workshop opened up many of the “givens” that tended to be taken for granted in interrogating the nature of “Asian families”. First, it became obvious during the workshop that the term “Asian” cannot be assumed to be a monolithic signifier to

describe “families”. In the workshop papers alone, “nationalities of orientation” that cropped up included Indonesians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai, Taiwanese, PRC Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Korean, Bangladeshi, Indian, Indo-Fijians and Nepalese. Destination countries where members of transnational families resided ranged as widely, and included Saudi Arabia, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. It is also not just a question of the enormous diversity rendering a term like “Asian” of little use other than as a broad umbrella term. Defining “Asian” by “nationality” is also inadequate when confronted with the processes of hybridity and change at work. As part of transnational family formations and maintenance, nationalities become hyphenated in all kinds of ways, including instances of cross-nationality, similar-ethnicity marriages as described by Shen Hsiu-hua’s discussion of Taiwan-China cross-strait unions (what she called “the international division of labour in marital and familial relations across the Taiwan Strait”). Other examples of hybridity at work in a familial context included cross-nationality, cross-ethnicity unions between Southeast Asian brides and Taiwanese men discussed by Ching-lung Tsay, and hyphenated offspring in Sallie Yea’s paper on Filipinas married to American GIs in Korea.

Yet, hyphenation itself is not a complete answer to our attempt to understand what is contained in the term “Asian”, for Maliwan Khruemanee’s paper on Burmese migrants in Thailand showed us that in the whole process of transnationalising the family, the children could indeed become bereft of nationality, stateless in all senses of the word. Similarly, Josephine Smart touched on the children rendered illegitimate with no legal status as a result of splitting the family across the Hong Kong-China border in her paper. Hybridity does not only produce a new level of complexity, it could indeed result in emptiness. Hybridity could also be offset by the countervailing forces of boundary maintenance and community discipline as seen in the institution of transnational arranged marriages in Selvaraj Velayutham and Amanda Wise’s analysis of a translocal moral economy based on cross-nationality, intra-caste marriages among migrants from certain Tamil Nadu villages who have settled in Singapore. Inasmuch as transnational families may open up spaces for “hybridity”, the transnational strategy may also be a conservative force that reproduces “tradition”.

“Transnational”

The papers also opened up multiple dimensions of transnationality as applied to understanding families – it is not only about “transnational corporations of kin” (Carmen Voigt-Graf’s term in her paper on transnational family strategies in Fiji) but also political economies, social economies, moral economies and communities of sentiment. In other words, to understand transnational families, we need to give attention to every dimension, from the political, economic, cultural, social, sexual, to the religious and moral dimensions of living transnationally. In many papers, attention was also drawn to the fact that what is in transnational circulation in sustaining transnational families was not just people on the move, but also money, commodities, remittances in kind, gifts, skills, human capital, obligations, care, discipline and encouragement, reminders (text messages as wake-up calls and biblical passages from the Daily Bread as Rhacel Parrenas

explained in her paper about “long-distance intimacy” between Filipino migrant mothers and their “left-behind” children), as well as the “dark side” of emotions (Maggi Leung’s term) and those constituting the dynamics of social control such as guilt, shame and fear (as discussed in Velayutham and Wise’s paper). Clearly too, transnational family formation also involves the politics of place (as illustrated by Catharina Williams’ paper on sojourning Eastern Indonesian migrants), and negotiations across cross-cutting axes of ethnicity, class, citizenship status, caste, generation, sexuality and gender. What is salient in these negotiations is the sense of ‘in-betweenness’ – in-between generations, in-between places, and in-between cultures – as illustrated in papers such as Allen Bartley and Paul Spoonley’s on the “one-and-a-half generation” Asian migrants in New Zealand.

“Families”

If “transnational” is multidimensional, the concept of the transnational “family” appears even more diverse. Indeed, “family” may be defined by blood relations, by marriage, and may well be based on imagined desires and visions as indicated in the commonly encountered discourse of migrating “for the sake of the family”. In the papers, there were a wide range of terminologies used, including “families of orientation”, “families of procreation”, “sending families”, “host families” (where the foreign domestic worker is supposedly treated as “one of the family”), “left-behind” families, and families with “absentee father”, “absentee mother” or “absentee parents”.

Our understanding of the relationship between “nuclear” and “extended” families is also challenged by transnationalism studies. While the “extended” family may be drawn in to strengthen and enable the “nuclear” family (such as grandmothers who became substitute mothers to tend to left-behind children, as found in Leung’s discussion of travelling, frequent-flyer grannies), this need not be the case. Williams provided counter-examples where transnational migrant women’s ability to focus on and nurture the “nuclear” family is improved by distancing themselves from the “extended” family.

Many papers also dealt with the notion of transnational families in two nations, where one or both sides contained elements of “irregularity”. So it is that we heard in this workshop not only of mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, brides and grooms, but also of “first wives”, “second wives”, “mistresses”, “widow by heart and abandoned wife by law” and *queridas* (Filipino for “mistresses”, as discussed in Lauser’s paper on marriage migration among Filipinas), *chong bac von am* (“Vietnamese for husband in the north, wife in the south” as described by Tran Phi Phuong), as well as *er nai* (a Chinese phrase meaning second wives) and “situational singles” (as discussed in Shen’s paper). Clearly, we need a much more complex and imaginative vocabulary to make sense of transnational families. Adding to this, we also need a vocabulary to describe the generational effects of transnationalism if we want to go beyond phrases such as “1.5 generations”, the contrast between “old-timers” and “newcomers”, and the language of assimilation, acculturation and integration.

“Asian Transnational Families”

The workshop was highly productive of a wide range of ideas. We conclude this report with some general observations about research on “Asian transnational families”:

First, many of the papers including Keiko Yamanaka's (on Nepalese migrants in Japan) and Tran Phi Phuong's (on Vietnamese dual-career couples) urged us to take into account the specific historical structures of families and to expect how different these may be. The need then is to visit the historical conditions and specific traditions under which translocal families are formed and to resist lumping them into a single category labelled "Asian".

Second, what is clear is that flexibilisation is something which not only characterizes production but also the reproductive sphere. Smart described this as the "flexibility of household affiliation" over time and explained that this constant morphing is both a strength and a weakness. This is also picked up in Elsie Ho and Richard Bedford's paper tracing the evolution of Chinese transnational families in New Zealand. At the same time, the ideology and reality of "being family" remains enduring, for when it comes to families, there seems to be a broader imaginary, a vision which transcends a specific moment to encompass different spaces and future generations. As the "family" must knit together production and reproduction, transnationalism provides a means to separate the two spatially in order to keep the family together. It is also a means to accumulate "cultural capital", as Johanna Waters' paper on educational strategies among Hong Kong Chinese transnational families illustrate.

Third, transnationalism seems to be drawn upon as a strategy at a range of points, from the point of family formation through transnational marriages, to situations of split or stretched families with different members moving to and fro across boundaries, to even immigrant/settled families who continue to practice transnational strategies. As is clear from Rachel Silvey's work on Indonesian migrants returning "home" through Terminal Three (of Jakarta's airport), Habibul Khondker's paper on notions of the "home", "nation", and the "world" among Bengali-speaking transnational families, as well as Elaine Ho's discussion of "flexible citizenship" among Singaporeans pulled by the ties of "family" and "nation", research to further understanding of the transnational family also needs to be nested within analysis of different scales, "downwards" to the "body" and the "individual" as well as upwards in terms of the "community", "nation", the "region" and the "global" scale.