

## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

### **Title:**

Migration Infrastructures and the Production of Migrant Mobilities

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### **Migration Infrastructures and the Production of Migrant Mobilities**

Recent studies in mobilities have shown a growing interest in the myriad of infrastructures that daily support the movements of people, objects, and even Internet signals (see Crang *et al.*, 2006). Taking the view that moving is umbilically tied to critical moments of fixity that organise, sort and order otherwise amorphous flows, this recent corpus has cast into sharp relief a whole host of ‘moorings’, or physical and organisational architectures, responsible for structuring, mobilising and giving meaning to movement through their particular arrangements (Lindquist *et al.*, 2012; Urry, 2003). In fact, infrastructures can most broadly be understood as socio-technical platforms for mobility (Larkin 2013) thus disturbing any easy distinction between movement and materiality. Especially salient in mobilities studies is research on transport infrastructures, which has included studies on, for example: the global organisation of logistical supply chains (Cidell, 2011; Cowen, 2010); the securitisation of transport facilities for exceptional groups such as asylum seekers (Gill, 2009); and the infusion of particular political meanings and identities in travel-scapes such as roads (Jones and Merriman, 2009). Being one of the most conspicuous organisational structures in the age of international travel, the airport has furthermore received acute attention for the way it actively produces modern aeromobile subjects and instils a distinctive culture of flying (Salter, 2008). Clearly, these explorations have unsettled any assumptions that infrastructures merely exist for the conduct of traffic. They have, instead, drawn attention to infrastructures’ particular ordering capacities and political potentials.

While mobilities research is careful to point out the purchase of infrastructures in transport, it has been more reticent about how similar, if not overlapping, constellations of socio-material arrangements work to bring forth international migration as another mobile phenomenon. As a complex system of mobilities/immobilities, rather than a straightforward movement of people from one state to another, international migration is veritably a product of infrastructures too, having taken on different trajectories at different times and spaces according to how it has been organised (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). As Martin (2011) demonstrates, a simple migratory journey today is necessarily contingent on a variety of organisational structures that shape opportunities for, and sanction certain, movements. While access to the aeromobile system is often a given prerequisite for contemporary migration, the passages of those lacking such access are frequently further disqualified by their disconnects from other, less apparent infrastructural affordances, such as legal documentation, the Internet, and credit cards (see also Sheller, 2010). This points to a need to not just put into relations the (im)mobilities of different social groups (Adey, 2006), but, more critically, to understand how *whole regimes* of ‘legitimate’ international

travel are being formulated through assemblages of infrastructures that relationally produce different migrancies. By this reading, infrastructures are important not simply because they are instrumental to coordinating movements, but because they have the power to steer mobilities and variably produce migrant subjects.

This special issue turns to a collection of different ‘migration infrastructures’ to derive a sense of how these physical and organisational architectures are generative of migrant mobilities. We take an ‘infrastructural approach’ in this project, not to study infrastructures again as operational systems, but to disentangle how migrant mobilities are given significance and direction through the infrastructuring process. Drawing together studies variously concerned with the orders, structures and ‘technical objects’ of migration (Delaplace, 2012) in Asia, the issue aims to illuminate a diversity of organisational frameworks that have come to inform the morphologies and meanings of migration in this increasingly mobile region. In particular, not only are these infrastructures creating unequal categories of migrants in Asia, they are also (re)inventing migration as a series of cultures and norms that, on the one hand, serve to discriminate against certain mobilities, and, on the other, present themselves as windows of opportunity to migrants. Infrastructures that we would like to unpack range from taken-for-granted documentary systems such as passports and visas, to state and non-state apparatuses like migration agencies and transport systems. We also consider less visible, but no less crucial forms of migrant services and facilities, including physical workplaces and social networks involved in labour importation. By gathering a series of papers looking at different iterations of migration infrastructures, we aim to destabilise understandings of migration as a singular, *a priori* phenomenon. Rather than adopting an essentialist stance, we seek to render migration as a mobility—or bundle of mobilities—that has more contingent and political origins and effects.

## **The Productive Power of Infrastructures**

Central to this project is our insistence that infrastructures are as socially productive as they are facilitative or enabling. While this argument is, in itself, not new, mobilities scholars have rarely paused to consider how—and, indeed, why—infrastructures are such important loci in the articulation and conditioning of movement. One way this issue would like to contribute is to restore a sense of the pervasiveness and foundational relevance of infrastructures to all of social life, including migration. As Herman and Ausubel (1988: 1) write, ‘infrastructure is a reflection of our social and historical evolution. It is a symbol of what we are collectively, and its forms and functions sharpen our understanding of the similarities and differences among regions, groups and cultures’. According to this interpretation, infrastructures are what crucially define a society and its internal logics, giving it a distinctive identity in a particular time and space by virtue of the way that it, and its everyday affairs, are organised. Indeed, to extrapolate the views of Graham and Marvin (2001: 8), societies and spaces are but ‘expressions of infrastructure’; without which there can be little coherence within these social formations.

Studying migration through this lens is to acknowledge the analogous contingency of migrant mobilities on their own inherent infrastructural underpinnings. It avers that there remain underlying organisational forces that give rise to migration as a particular social event, beyond universal narratives that treat the same as a generic displacement of people or a change in

national domicile (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). In other words, when examined infrastructurally, migration becomes much more than who moves and who does not, exhibiting a more emergent and unfixed nature. Here, Star's (1999) call to 'study the unstudied' dimensions of social organisation, and 'infrastructuring' as verb, may prove instructive. For her, it is fallacious to envision infrastructure as a ready system of substrates, for 'infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept, becoming real infrastructure in relation to organized practices' (Star, 1999: 380). By valorising the previously neglected practices that draw together physical structures, technical objects, materials and people to organise movement, our approach is to similarly engender a more fluid notion of what it means to 'migrate'. Like Star, we seek to engage in an 'ethnography of infrastructure', so as to promote a more ecological understanding of how migration gets to *become*.

As three of us have explored elsewhere, the infrastructures that produce migration need not be the 'black box' they have so far been (Lindquist et al., 2012). What is needed is a perspective that shifts away from the people who move (as most migration and mobilities research tends to fixate on) towards those human *and* nonhuman actors that move migrants within specific infrastructural frames (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). If Martin's (2011) work highlights some of the infrastructural injunctions on modern migrant passages, historical research on past migration regimes is able to shed light on a wider spectrum of actors that had previously been responsible for producing migrations of different veins. While Cresswell (2006) documents the national immigration policies in nineteenth-century United States that had espoused anti-Asianism, racialised mobilities and unequal citizenship rights, others refer to a myriad of interventions by non-state actors, including shipping companies, migrant brokers and colonial administrations, that conjured borders, territories and migrant mobilities of alternative kinds (Kuhn, 2008; McKeown, 2012). Taken together, these examples convey that migration perhaps never stayed still definitionally, as the current states-based system might have us think. There can be as many possibilities of what it means to migrate as there are manners of organising its streams.

This issue does not presume that infrastructures assume any deterministic role, for, indeed, the preference or dominance of one infrastructural form over others necessarily entails its own competition and particular categorising moments in production (Larkin, 2013). Yet, it is exactly upon this contested terrain that the (im)mobilities they constitute can become unfixed. All the papers here collectively forward this notion—of migration as an ecological outcome, a series of cultures that have been born out of infrastructures that seem, at first, to be only regulating or supporting it, but actually continually (re)produce the meanings, practices and potentials of migrancy. By recognising migration as the constellational result of these moments in infrastructuring, it then becomes possible to appreciate what makes migrant mobilities 'real' and 'noteworthy' in the first place.

## **The Politics of Infrastructures**

A second related contribution that this special issue wishes to make concerns the issue of politics in the infrastructural production of migrant mobilities. To be sure, the organisational capacities of infrastructures are not only salient for their role in generating social orders; they are also entangled with power geometries that result in differential access to resources, thereby invoking

questions of equity and distributional justice. Winner's (1980) classic piece on whether 'artefacts have politics' represents an affirmation and reminder that infrastructures—even if seemingly devoid of human interference upon completion of their physical structures—*can* have political agencies. Citing the case of low road overpasses in Long Island, New York preventing bus riders from gaining the same access to local parks and amenities as white middle-class automobile users did, he illustrates how infrastructures are often constructed in ways that exact the political interests and discriminatory wills of their designers. Infrastructures, in other words, are always already inscribed with planning power, which dictates who gets or does not get to benefit from their socio-material arrangements. Naturalised as taken-for-granted systems, infrastructures can and do perform politics in their daily use, through specific configurations of actors, elements and their relations (Carse, 2012).

Applying such a logic to international migration and its infrastructures can foreground similar episodes of unequal distribution of 'mobility' as a resource and opportunity. In recent parlance, it raises issues of 'mobility justice' (Cook and Butz, 2016), by pointing out pertinent discrepancies in who is free to move; who is forced to move; when they can or must move; how they ought to move; and who cannot move. Such variability in migration outcomes cannot simply be attributed to happenstance, but must be ethically traced to the different regimes, structures, and regulatory norms that orchestrate and impede movements at different times and spaces. While narrating encounters of frictions and difficulties in sustaining transnational lives from the migrant's perspective provides ground-up accounts, this does not fully capture the 'politics of mobility' as determined through governmental apparatuses that imperceptibly, but influentially, organise movements (Cresswell, 2010; Sheller, 2015). In this context, scholars need to treat migration infrastructures as an alternative knowledge repository, if not a starting point, through which divergent migration experiences can be elucidated and explained; failing which, the relative conditions under which migrants move (or do not move) become unjustly obscured.

Excavating the politics of migrant mobilities through their infrastructural foundations has the added benefit of addressing wider problems of uneven societal organisation. As Cook and Butz (2016: 401) further argue in respect to mobility justice, movements are not just sought after for their own sakes, but are 'fundamental structuring components of social hierarchies' and the mechanisms through which differential socio-economic outcomes and statuses are reproduced. How infrastructures produce and mobilise migrant subjects thus have direct consequences on the way societies are being (re)organised through the resultant mobilities. For instance, in migration studies, scholars often observe that increased in-flows of some migrant groups—particularly from the 'developing' world—have been a major source of tension in receiving states (Statham, 2016; Van de Veer, 2002; Ye, 2016). While this is increasingly true across the globe, it is also less an inevitable outcome of diversity than a reflection of migratory regimes that structurally produce difference in these migrants and incorporate them on unequal terms—as pertaining to residency, employment status, healthcare and degree of surveillance (Yeoh and Lin, 2013). As such, focusing on migration infrastructures that enact this difference can further deepen our understanding of how modern immigrant societies are splintered, and the ways through which hierarchies are produced within them. It presents a more holistic view of the place of migrants and citizens in a society, and how their relative positions come to be sedimented through the political infrastructures that mobilise them.

Clearly, the political purchase of interrogating migration infrastructures runs far and wide, allowing the explication of different mobility (in)justices beyond simple bifurcations between those who move and those who are stuck in place. In between these binary categories are variedly those who move with relative ease, those who migrate under precarious terms, those whose mobilities are ascribed pejorative meanings, and those whose relocations come at great personal costs. This issue and its papers are committed to surfacing these different inequities, as well as the particular ways in which they are produced through infrastructure. It is furthermore interested in how the facilitation and/or regulation of mobility is tied to new forms of societal organisation—whether at the scale of the nation-state or city, or that of the family, school, factory or workplace. By tracing the infrastructural origins of these social formations, it is hoped that a more systemic perspective of migration and its impacts can be promulgated.

### **The ‘Asian’ Turn to Infrastructures**

The final intervention that this issue wants to make is to cast a focus more strongly on Asia, in coming to grips with how infrastructures mobilise migrants there. All the papers in this issue therefore share variable degrees of engagement with the region, either wholly concentrating on migration streams between Asian countries, or evincing global mobilities through the lens of infrastructures located within Asia. In global comparative terms, private recruitment brokers have had an unprecedented role in mediating migration across the Asia since the middle of the nineteenth century (Lindquist et al., 2012). In tandem with ongoing infrastructural developments and the ensuing growth of both international migration and intra-regional tourism (Winter et al., 2009)—Jakarta-Singapore is now the busiest international airline route in the world—this suggests that the integration of human and non-human mediators is creating increasingly complex infrastructural forms in the region that may be unparalleled.

Nevertheless, emphasising ‘Asia’ as a unit of analysis is not to claim homogeneity within what is obviously a vast and irreducible continent; rather, the diversity of Asia, along with its growing prominence as a sender, receiver, transit stop and exchange centre of migrant flows, renders it precisely a rich empirical ground to begin unpacking the different possible infrastructures that multifariously produce migrant subjects and order their flows. Notably, most Asian countries have been undergoing processes of nation-building at the same time as they are embracing globalisation and regionalisation. They have demonstrated adeptness in installing the requisite technical and regulatory infrastructures to manage increased mobilities in their midst, but many types of migration also remain new to their policymakers, who are, to this day, still deliberating on how to regulate them. As an emergent milieu framed by experimental regimes of countless shapes, modes and formats that the literature has so far yet to fully attend to, Asia provides a pertinent case for studying how migrant mobilities are generated in concert with nascent ‘infrastructuring’ processes. It can serve as a fertile test case and fresh methodological window through which new knowledge productions concerning migration can take place, and be debated (Xiang, 2013).

Indeed, Asia does not merely replicate tried and tested organisational structures in established immigrant societies in the West (Lin and Yeoh, 2016). While there are some basic, state-centric features in international migration that, because of globalisation and geopolitical hegemony,

have become universal rubrics, Asian societies are flexible enough to adapt these overarching principles, at times devising their own infrastructuring strategies for migration. Take the example of the basic state-based legal infrastructure centred on the passport and visa (Salter, 2004). Not only have Asian countries elaborated on this system by adding new visa categories (e.g. sports talent and study mother permits in Singapore) according to their social and economic needs, they have also sought to claim ‘their’ outgoing diasporas by extending special residential rights and other privileges to emigrants, in effect encouraging their circulatory, transnational migration (Ho, 2011; Huang and Yeoh, 2005). These alterations deserve greater scrutiny as to how they may be diversifying, if not complicating, a dominant international migration system founded on a clear-cut ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ philosophy. Coupled with other non-state infrastructures that, too, help to produce migrant mobilities, Asia may prove to be productive ground for re-theorising how people move and migrate.

By focusing on Asia, we contribute to mobilities studies not by identifying ‘new’ patterns, causes or consequences of movement in yet another context for typological curation; although there may be a particular intensity to transformations in the region. Rather, our aim is of a more epistemological nature. Expressly, we hope to shed light on the relational ways in which Asia speaks back to questions of infrastructure in international migration, amid contact with other geographic regions, and societal impulses within its own quarters. In highlighting the strategic responses and adaptations to these interactions through infrastructure building, we seek to offer another perspective on how the mobilities ensuing from these organisational innovations are concomitantly driving social change within the region itself—whether in the way its societies now manage their labour force, distinguish foreigners and strangers in their midst, or encourage temporary forms of sojourn and transnational circulation. Clearly, these findings can benefit and add to discourses of what it means to move and migrate, and how these mobilities are produced. In a field not used to stasis and sedentarism, such a cosmopolitan view based on insights from ‘elsewhere’ ought to strike a resonant chord.

## **The Papers**

To varying degrees, all the papers in this issue answer the above three calls to contribute to a more infrastructurally informed understanding of migration and the production of migrant mobilities. By examining how international flows are structurally organised, politically enacted and orchestrated against the backdrop of a globalising Asia, they transform ‘migration’ into another kind of mobility that has social significance, rather than a mere displacement that only becomes salient after the migrant has arrived or departed. The issue opens with a series of three papers on migration infrastructures related to state regimes of control. Xiang Biao’s paper begins by elucidating a system of emigration management in China, as mediated through a network of *jidi* or bases that specialise in recruiting, training and preparing would-be migrants. By ordering out-migration in these ways, bases not only help facilitate the mobilities of workers out of the country, but also develop a particular strain of migration that benefit the state’s interests. The second and third papers by Lily Cho and Wai-Chi Chee respectively turn to two other related migratory phenomena bordering the Chinese world. While the former examines the issuance of the Mainland Travel Permit to Hong Kong and Macau residents as a means to legibly mark out a ‘different’ cultural identity between China and the two Special Administrative Regions, the latter offers a grounded analysis of how Hong Kong institutions are, in reverse, constraining the

mobilities of pregnant Chinese women wanting to migrate and secure for themselves and their children the right of abode on the island. Both cases convey a sense of how state infrastructures are seeking to (re)write the trajectories of cross-border mobilities in less spontaneous terms. By enacting particular kinds of surveillance and heavy management, they aim to stymie the transnational ambitions of ordinary migrants, while carving out particular visions of society that are reflexive of the bordering dilemmas in Greater China.

The next three papers discuss the infrastructural role that non-state actors—or, more specifically, intermediaries and brokers of different kinds—play in shaping Asia's migrations. In the fourth paper, Johan Lindquist forwards an innovative stance by contending that the social networks of recruitment agents can themselves constitute an infrastructure through which labour deals are struck and workers are mobilised across borders. Not so much pinpointing managerial actions based on rational decisions, Lindquist's rich ethnography sheds light on a more ephemeral, if also more spontaneous, kind of organisational tactic in migrant mobilities, founded on business meetings, banal interactions and spontaneous socialities. Brenda Yeoh, Heng Leng Chee and Grace Baey's paper offers a parallel perspective on the role of brokers in mediating the movements of would-be brides from Vietnam to Singapore. While marriage brokers view their facilitation more officiously as commercial matchmaking services, they too appeal to cultural sensibilities, such as fate and expectations, in their negotiations with clients, in a bid to smooth over the uncertainties of transnational unions, and thereby condition marriage flows selectively across states. The sixth paper turns to education agents' mobilisation of student migration out of Nepal. Specifically, Susan Thieme's research discovers how members of the Educational Consultants Association of Nepal strive to provide professional and formal services in their assistance rendered to prospective students wishing to migrate for higher education. Not only are these agents helping Nepalese students successfully plug into the educational infrastructures of Western countries like the UK, they are also fashioning a particular stream of student migration that is contingent on clients' ability to pay the agent's fees.

The final two papers examine two less conventional kinds of migration infrastructures that are, nonetheless, integrally tied to the production migrant mobilities. Max Hirsh's paper considers the role of Southeast Asia's low cost carriers and airports in supporting the exchange of migrant workers between countries with labour surpluses and those with deficits. His work underscores the dependence of modern migration on the air transport system, as well as, increasingly, a whole host of ancillary infrastructures, such as credit cards, Internet connection, and ground transport, which travellers and planners in the region do not all seem to have a firm handle on. This raises, again, issues of mobility equity and justice, while exposing the limits of infrastructure when the mobile practices of travellers do not coincide with design. The last paper by Tianfeng Liu and Weiqiang Lin considers how workplaces and their socio-material habituses have driven British academics' circulations to/from Sino-UK international branch campuses in China in recent years. Suggesting that work environments are often a lacuna in migration research (especially among the highly skilled), their study postulates that the workplace can figure as a stealthy infrastructure that can equally prompt and instigate (future) mobilities among migrants through their everyday immersion and encounters. By contemplating an infrastructure as eclectic as this, this paper hopes to have propounded a deeper appreciation of how migration is mobilised in and around Asia through everyday artefacts and environments one often takes for granted. Above all, it, along with the issue more generally, hopes to have drawn sufficient attention to the importance

of infrastructures, as the organisational beginnings, and signifier, of what we know as 'migration'.

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