

Understanding Asia: Inter-Asian Mobilities (Im)mobility and Class Among Highly-Educated Middling Migrants in Asia



(Scan for registration)

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Hybrid event

Migration research has often focused on the vulnerable, presumably 'low-skilled' or low-wage migrants, who are more often than not moving from developing countries (the Global South) with the hope to settle (permanently) in industrialized countries of the Global North. A different perspective is that of the highly-mobile, so-called skilled migrants or transnational professionals who have been framed as short-term stayers with little barriers to onwards migration and little interest in staying in their destination countries long-term. This presentation unsettles the binary image of Global North and Global South and the ever mobile (highly-skilled) as the opposite of the immobile (less skilled or less capital-rich) labour migrants. Drawing on empirical data from two qualitative research projects the presentation adopts an intersectional perspective on class and (im)mobility in order to better conceptualize 'middling migration' to and within contemporary Asia. The 'ideal immigration state' Singapore and Japan, as an emergent country of immigration with comparatively few foreign residents, serve as case studies for understanding current migration dynamics Asian market economies that defy neat classification along the Global North-Global South discourse. This approach further highlights the theoretical significance of challenging the skilled/unskilled binary in migration research and underlines the complexity of highly-educated migrants' (im)mobilities in Asian migration regimes, whose history of immigrant incorporation differs from well-researched Western contexts.

The first part of the presentation zooms in on a longitudinal study of young, middle-class Europeans – the EU Generation – who pursue labour migration to Singapore and Tokyo as way of realizing their career and classed lifestyle aspirations, which they deem unfeasible to attain in the post-Lehman shock European Union. The second part of the talk examines the case of foreign entrepreneurship in Singapore's and Tokyo's knowledge-intensive industries, the latter of which have tried to attract foreign entrepreneurship in order to boost domestic innovation. As a counterpoint to the aforementioned (European) migrant employees, the (predominantly Asian) migrant entrepreneurs – as employers and self-employed foreigners – establish somewhat different social and professional networks in the receiving societies. However, the settling practices of both groups reveal similar processes of differentiated incorporation and foreground middle-class aspirations of socio-economic mobility that require, against stereotypical notions of highly-educated migrants as ever mobile, geographical immobility in the receiving societies.

Helena Hof is Senior Research and Teaching Fellow in Social Science of Japan at the University of Zurich and a Research Fellow at the Socio-Cultural Department of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. Her work lies at the nexus of mobility studies, the sociology of work, skilled and middle class migration, gender, ethnicity and race, and global cities and entrepreneurship. She is currently part of a German government-funded collaborative project on the role of skills in labor migration processes in Asia, within which Helena examines foreign entrepreneurs in Tokyo's and Singapore knowledge-intensive startup scene. Helena holds guest researcher affiliations with Waseda's Institute of Asian Migrations in Tokyo and the Asia Research Institute's Migration Cluster at the National University of Singapore. Some of her most recent publications include 'Migratory class-making in global Asian cities: the European mobile middle negotiating ambivalent privilege in Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai (with Jaafar Alloul, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies) and the monograph *The-EU-Migrant-Generation-in-Asia* (Bristol University Press).