

WORKSHOP

THEORIZING MIGRATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN ASIA AND BEYOND

**3-4
APRIL
2025**

**HYBRID
FORMAT**

NUS AS8 04-04 &
Online via Zoom

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This workshop is jointly organized by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). The "Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Upward Social Mobility in Asia" project at PRIO has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 948403).

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Upward social mobility in Asia today, whether aspirational or actual, predominantly refers to becoming middle class, with dramatic leaps increasingly being made into middle-classness. The expanding Asian middle class is empirically observable in its various manifestations: housing developments, shopping malls, and the proliferation of coffee joints, to mention just a few. While the lower bounds of the middle classes in Asia continue to confront varying degrees of precarity, for increasing proportions of populations across Asia, partaking in middle-class lifestyles is becoming aspirational if not occasionally within reach.

Taking this as our point of departure for this workshop, we seek to draw links between these observable realities of social mobility, with the equally salient trend of migration in Asia and beyond. Migration patterns in the region are highly variegated, connecting the internal with the international, the short-term with the long-term. The drivers and outcomes of migration today may be equally varied, prompting us to examine the multifold interactions between migration and social mobility afresh from an Asia-centric perspective. This is needed not only because of the rapid rise of migration as a vital social force for change in Asia, but also to take into account the prevalence of restrictive migration regimes among Asian countries, which can curtail migrant mobility in some instances while undermining the assumption that migration can be a means to achieving upward social mobility in other cases.

Focusing on the Asian context, the workshop seeks to explore the interactions between multiple forms of migrations and the processes of social mobility, whether upward, downward, or sideways. Themes of interest linking social and spatial mobility include but are not limited to the following:

- The role of migration in the emergence of the new middle classes in Asia, for example, how upward mobility affects migration aspirations while also generating increasing demand for personal/domestic services provided by migrants
- Migration-citizenship regimes, opportunity structures and obstacles to social mobility
- Transnational family dynamics, financial remittances, and social remittances in shaping social mobility; gender relations and intergenerational social mobility are of particular interest
- Education, occupation, entrepreneurship, and property ownership as key factors in shaping the migration-social mobility nexus
- Life-course and temporal approaches to social-spatial mobility
- Linking internal and international migration in studying social mobility
- Migration, aspirations and social mobility in the city

WORKSHOP CONVENORS

Prof Brenda S.A. YEOH

Asia Research Institute & Department of Geography, National University of Singapore

Dr Wei YANG

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

Prof Marta Bivand ERDAL

Peace Research Institute Oslo

Dr Karen LIAO

Peace Research Institute Oslo

3 APRIL 2025 • THURSDAY

10:30 – 11:00	WELCOME REMARKS
	BRENDA S.A. YEOH , National University of Singapore MARTA BIVAND ERDAL , Peace Research Institute Oslo
11:00 – 12:30	PANEL 1 • TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL MOBILITY AND MIGRATION
<i>Chairperson</i>	THEODORA LAM , National University of Singapore
11:00	When Development Eras and Life Courses Collide: Livelihood Pathways in Rural Thailand JONATHAN RIGG , University of Bristol
11:20	Asian Empirical Realities: Theorisation of Spatial and Social Mobility Interactions ANU ABRAHAM , Peace Research Institute Oslo MARTA BIVAND ERDAL , Peace Research Institute Oslo PATRICK NYHEIM SCHJØLBERG , Peace Research Institute Oslo
11:40	Migration, Remittances and Wellbeing: Exploring the Impact of Middle Eastern Migration on the Social Mobility of Tea Estate Communities in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka MOHIDEEN MOHAMED ALIKHAN , University of Peradeniya
12:00	Questions & Answers
12:30 – 13:30	LUNCH
13:30 – 15:30	PANEL 2 • GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY AND MIGRATION INTERACTIONS
<i>Chairperson</i>	MARTA BIVAND ERDAL , Peace Research Institute Oslo
13:30	Migration, Social Mobility and Empowerment: Negotiating Gender Roles among Stay-Behind Spouses in Bangladesh SABNAM SARMIN LUNA , Jagannath University
13:50 <i>Online</i>	Parental Migration and the Education Trajectories of Young Adults in Indonesia: Does Gender Matter? LUCY P. JORDAN , James Cook University
14:10	Questions & Answers I
14:30	Hustle and Run: Gender, Time and Postmaterial Values in Middle-Class Graduate Migration from China to Australia FRAN MARTIN , The University of Melbourne
14:50 <i>Online</i>	'The Dimmed Light in Her Eyes': The Striving Self, Bounded Social Mobility and Youth (Dis)enchantment in China XIAORONG GU , University of Suffolk
15:10	Questions & Answers II
15:30 – 16:00	AFTERNOON TEA
16:00 – 17:30	PANEL 3 • A TRANSNATIONAL LENS ON (MIDDLE) CLASS, MIGRATION AND INEQUALITIES
<i>Chairperson</i>	KAREN LIAO , Peace Research Institute Oslo
16:00 <i>Online</i>	Migration Ability Acquisition through Servitude: How Male Filipino Youths Achieve the Triple Spatial, Life-Course, and Social Mobilities RODERICK GALAM , Oxford Brookes University
16:20	Reconceptualising Transnational Marriage Migration through the Nexus of Social-Spatial Mobility WEI YANG , National University of Singapore BRENDA S.A. YEOH , National University of Singapore
16:40	Middle-Class Expatriation in Qatar: Performing Belonging, Performing Class MARI NORBAKK , Chr. Michelsen Institute
17:00	Questions & Answers
17:30	END OF DAY 1
17:30 – 19:30	WORKSHOP DINNER (For Presenters, Chairpersons and Organisers Only)

4 APRIL 2025 • FRIDAY

10:30 – 12:00	PANEL 4 • IMAGINING AND THEORISING SPATIAL AND SOCIAL MOBILITY
<i>Chairperson</i>	JONATHAN RIGG , University of Bristol
10:30	Moving On, Moving Out, and Moving Up?: Theorising Spatial and Social Mobility TIM CRESSWELL , University of Edinburgh
10:50	Mobilizing Imagined Futures: Transnational Discourses of Social Mobility among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia and Resettled Rohingya in Chicago NURSYAZWANI , University of Pennsylvania
11:10	Middling Migration from Unstable Contexts: How Digital Migration Brokers from Türkiye (Re)present Class and Social Mobility for Potential Middle-Class Migrants? AYŞEN ÜSTÜBICI , Koç University
11:30	Questions & Answers
12:00 – 13:00	LUNCH
13:00 – 14:00	PANEL 5 • LIFE COURSE APPROACHES TO SOCIAL AND SPATIAL MOBILITY
<i>Chairperson</i>	WEI YANG , National University of Singapore
13:00	Linked Lives and the Shaping of Social Mobility in Asia KAREN LIAO , Peace Research Institute Oslo MARTA BIVAND ERDAL , Peace Research Institute Oslo
13:20	Inheriting Mobilities: Aspirations, Journeys, and Legacies across Generations RESTO CRUZ , University of Edinburgh
13:40	Questions & Answers
14:00 – 14:30	AFTERNOON TEA
14:30 – 15:30	PANEL 6 • SOCIAL MOBILITY, AGENCY AND STUDENT MIGRATION
<i>Chairperson</i>	ANU ABRAHAM , Peace Research Institute Oslo
14:30	Being Born Poor is Irrelevant: A Discussion on the Social-Mobility-Driven Agency of Non-privileged Chinese International Students in their Post-graduation Returning Employment Trajectories CHU LIU , University College London
14:50	Navigating Neoliberal Aspirations: Middle-Class Indian Students and the Global Education Landscape ANAND PANAMTHOTTAM CHERIAN , George Mason University
15:10	Questions & Answers
15:30 – 15:45	CLOSING REMARKS
	BRENDA S.A. YEOH , National University of Singapore WEI YANG , National University of Singapore MARTA BIVAND ERDAL , Peace Research Institute Oslo KAREN LIAO , Peace Research Institute Oslo
15:45	END OF WORKSHOP

When Development Eras and Life Courses Collide: Livelihood Pathways in Rural Thailand

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This paper draws on a forty-year longitudinal (1982-2022) village study of Thailand to reflect on the intersections between four transitions: migration, social, agrarian and development. These are evidently not discrete but form a complex nexus of relations. The paper attempts three things. First, to place 'the' village and its inhabitants centre stage in the theatre of development, showing how rural folk have been far more than bit parts in development transitions, but principal protagonists. Thailand is now an upper-middle income economy because hundreds of thousands of rural women and men have chosen to contribute to the country's industrialization. Second, to reveal how these development transitions alter what is possible and what is desirable, such that social mobilities and sociality are continually reframed by and through development. And third, to show how rural spaces act as attractors, drawing people back from sites of urban consumption to the countryside for a range of reasons that cross-cut the developmental (precarity) and the social (caring). Only by redrawing the production boundary more expansively—including care as well as work, reproduction along with production—is it possible to make visible these changes. Villages like the two that inform this paper are not relict survivors of a passing agrarian age, but central components in the shaping of the modern world.

Jonathan Rigg is Professor of Geography in the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol. He was formerly Director of the Asia Research Institute and Professor of Geography at the National University of Singapore. His work centres on the causes, nature, direction and outcomes of agrarian change in the Asian region. He has undertaken extended periods of fieldwork in rural areas of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Nepal, written ten books, and authored or co-authored more than 100 papers. He is currently writing a new book with the working title *The Relational Village*.

Wasana La-ornglew is Lecturer in the College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thammasat University Lampang Campus, Lampang, Thailand.

Monchai Phongsiri is a researcher at the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

Albert Salamanca is Senior Research Fellow at the Stockholm Environment Institute, Bangkok, Thailand.

Mattara Sripun is attached to the Research Group on Wellbeing and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

Asian Empirical Realities: Theorisation of Spatial and Social Mobility Interactions

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How can Asian empirical realities inform new theorisation of spatial and social mobility interactions? And what might decolonial theorisation from Asia yield? The reality of growing middle classes in Asia reflects ongoing increases in living standards and processes of upward social mobility. Existing research documents the plurality of middleclasses in Asia, including emphasis on their multi-tiered nature. Meanwhile, since the lower-middle-classes tend to interface with people struggling to move out of poverty, precarity is a concern within the lowest middleclass bounds. However, millions of Asians also fall into the lower-to-middle middle classes, and it is primarily this group which we consider in this paper. For, simultaneous to the social mobility processes that contribute to the expansion of these middle classes, many Asian societies are experiencing high levels of internal mobility – circular, seasonal, long-term migration, as well as return migration. International migration is also salient, both within Asia, as well as out of Asia, with different time durations. This paper draws on the MigrationRhythms project's survey data collected in four Asian cities (n = 2016), Hanoi, Karachi, Manila and Mumbai, with middle-class respondents in select urban areas. We investigate how Asian empirical realities can inform new theorisation of spatial and social mobility interactions. First, we explore different known mechanisms of achieving social mobility, related to human capital (education), financial and material capital (accumulation of assets (index) and property), and social capital (including intergenerational dynamics). Second, we draw on innovative measures of spatial mobility, foregrounding past migration, often internal, which we analyse in relation to the distance and duration of migration of family members. Finally, we analyse the interactions of social mobility with spatial mobility through different combinations of these measures. This analysis allow us to develop fresh theorisation of spatial and social mobility interactions, on the basis of Asian empirical realities.

Anu Abraham is Senior Researcher at Peace Research Institute Oslo focusing primarily on the MigrationRhythms project's quantitative research component taking a lead in the collection, processing and analysis of survey data in Hanoi, Manila, Mumbai and Karachi. She is a development economist, with a research focus on migration and development in Asia. She has a PhD from Indian Institute of Technology Madras, where her work focused on labour migration from India to the Gulf Co-operation Council, and delved into aspects such as the decision to migrate, remit, and return and the interaction between migration and social mobility. She has also worked on women migrants, migrant food security, and impact of Covid19 on migrant workers, all from a global south perspective. She has been actively involved in engagements with civil society and governmental organizations working in the field of migration, particularly in India.

Marta Bivand Erdal is Research Professor in Migration Studies at Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), where she is Co-Director of the PRIO Migration Center. As a human geographer she is interested in the impacts of migration and transnationalism in both emigration and immigration contexts. Her research is about migration, development and remittances, and about living together in societies shaped by migration-related diversity. Marta's work draws on interview, focus group, and survey data, paying critical attention to the use of categories. She has published extensively within and beyond migration studies and regularly engages with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. She is currently (2021-2026) investigating connections between migration—of different durations and distances—and social mobility into the middle classes in Asia, in the ERC funded research project "Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Upward Social Mobility in Asia".

Patrick Nyheim Schjøberg is Research Assistant at the Peace Research Institute Oslo focusing on spatial data and quantitative methods. He has a master's in political science from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, with his MA thesis investigating how refugee hidden repatriations and inflows in refugee data affect host-communities in east Africa. Patrick's foremost interest is data quality, consistency, and creative methodology for migration data with an emphasis on spatiotemporal and moderating effects. His research is especially concerned with the material conditions of migration, for instance how access to, and the quality of, farmland surrounding refugee settlements impacts host-community-refugee relations in Uganda.

Migration, Remittances and Wellbeing: Exploring the Impact of Middle Eastern Migration on the Social Mobility of Tea Estate Communities in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka

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Nuwaraeliya district in Sri Lanka, popular for its tea production, is home to an economically and socially marginalized community of estate workers, who are descendants of those brought in during the colonial era. For over 200 years, these workers have faced various socio-economic hardships, including a dearth of employment options and inadequate wages both inside and outside the tea estates. Geographical constraints and a lack of opportunity lead to poverty and struggle for insufficient income for daily needs. In this context, as in other parts of the island, many women in the community migrate to Middle Eastern countries as housemaids for the wellbeing of their families. This study aims to investigate the role of Middle Eastern migration on the social mobility of the estate communities by using the wellbeing model (i) material (ii) relational and (iii) subjective. Connecting wellbeing dimensions to social mobility reveals how material resources, relational empowerment, and subjective satisfaction together contribute to the potential for social mobility among migrants' families. This study used a qualitative approach, incorporating in-depth interviews and the photovoice (PV) method. Twenty interviews were carried out with return migrants and the family members of the active migrants. The participants were purposely selected based on households with at least one family member who has migrated to the Middle East within the last ten years. Among them, ten participants were selected for the photovoice method and asked to take photos to capture insights into the effects of migration on the everyday lives of migrants' families. A following interview was conducted centered on the chosen photographs. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding, with themes aligned to the dimensions of the wellbeing model. This case study highlights how remittances sent back by these migrant women play a crucial role in enhancing the material wellbeing of their families. These remittances help bridge the gap left by insufficient wages from the tea industry, providing access to better living conditions, education for children and the overall wellbeing of the second generation of migrant families. The material accumulation of migrant women is also increasingly vital in empowering them within their households and communities, altering traditional gender dynamics and enhancing their decision-making power. It was observed that situations of material and relational wellbeing intersected to create more subjective wellbeing in the communities studied. Nevertheless, because of emotional strain and a lack of long-term security, migrants and their families are not fully satisfied with their subjective wellbeing. Despite these concerns for families in the community studied, migration remains one of the few viable avenues for upward social mobility.

Mohideen Mohamed Alikhan is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Geography, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. He graduated from the University of Colombo and then he did his MPhil at the Department of Geography, University of Peradeniya. Alikhan has completed his PhD on "Conviviality, Tension and Everyday Negotiations: Subaltern Cosmopolitanism and Governance Dynamics of Low-Income Neighbourhoods in Colombo, Sri Lanka" at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom. His research areas of interest include urban governance, housing, migration with special focus on displacement, relocations and labour.

Migration, Social Mobility and Empowerment: Negotiating Gender Roles among Stay-Behind Spouses in Bangladesh

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This study explores how stay-behind spouses in migrant households negotiate gender roles that affect family dynamics and facilitate spouses, especially women, to the process of empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Spouses in the migrant households, whether they are male migrants' wives or female migrants' husbands, undergo silent changes in their status within the family as well as in their community over time. The social acceptance of physical mobility and contact with the outside world, new roles and responsibilities, and new dialogues between husbands and wives across the host and home countries offer a ground for changes in migrant families. This paper captures the complex and multi-layered changes within migrant families in a migrant-sending community in the Munshiganj and Manikganj districts of Bangladesh. Data were collected from three hundred interviewees using open-ended questionnaires and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The findings show that the impact of migration on changing gender roles varies widely depending on the characteristics and socio-economic milieu of households. By managing finances and taking on more responsibilities, stay-behind wives in male migrant households become more influential in family affairs and societal empowerment. However, husbands who opt to stay at home face challenges as they take on additional household duties, often encountering criticism and stigma due to their spouses' migration. The results underline the need for policies that may support gender equity and promote positive family dynamics in the process of migration. This research contributes to a broader understanding of migration's impact on gender relations and social mobility, offering insights that can be applied to similar socio-economic settings in Asia.

Sabnam Sarmin Luna is Associate Professor at the Department of Geography and Environment, Jagannath University, Dhaka. She earned her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, with a special focus on migration and women empowerment. She has more than 12 years of teaching and research experience in the areas of migration, climate change and urban development. Her recent relevant articles include "Gender and Labor Migration: Empirical Evidence on Decision-Making Factors of Migration" in *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia*, "Disgraceful Return: Gulf Migration and Shifting National Narratives amid COVID-19" in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, "Female Migration and Stay-Behind Children in Bangladesh" in *Migration in South Asia: IMISCOE Regional Reader*, and "Migrant Wives: Dynamics of the Empowerment Process" in *Migration and Development*.

Parental Migration and the Education Trajectories of Young Adults in Indonesia: Does Gender Matter?

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This study adopts a longitudinal approach to examine how parental migration influences the education trajectories of young adults in Indonesia. We applied data from two waves of the Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA) project (Wave 1 in 2008, Wave 2 in 2016; average age at Wave 2: 18.8 years old; girls: 49.9%). Using a retrospective approach, we captured the education trajectories in ten different states that recorded individual educational history on a monthly basis. Sequence analysis was applied to describe and visualize the education trajectories of 467 Indonesian youths. Typology analysis captured three distinctive patterns: modern general education system (58.89%); religious education system (13.28%); early school leavers (27.84%). Multinomial regression analysis then identified the importance of parental migration as a predictor of the different trajectory patterns of children's education, demonstrating that gender matters. The findings highlight that fathers' (long-term) migration during a young person's childhood increased the likelihood of children experiencing educational continuity in the modern general education system. In addition, girls were found to be more likely to have been enrolled in the religious education system—at least at primary school—when their mothers were migrant.

Xiaochen Zhou is Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include child welfare, education, family studies, migration, and social service.

Lucy Jordan is Professor and Head of Social Work at James Cook University, Australia with research expertise in cross-cultural migration studies, global development challenges, and data-driven approaches to capacity building in the nonprofit sector. She is currently leading the third wave of longitudinal project Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia (CHAMPSEA) (study countries, Indonesia and the Philippines). Dr Jordan's research focuses on building the evidence base through empirical research, translation of evidence to social policy and intervention, and building capacity in the nonprofit sector to leverage empirical evidence for social change. She is particularly interested in understanding how migration transforms family relationships, and in supporting communities and governments to bolster formal and informal support systems that can enable families to best navigate their migration experiences. She has acted as a consultant for the International Organization of Migration, UNICEF, Terres d'Hommes, Freedom Fund, Youth Justice, and the Hong Kong government.

Han Zhang is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interest focuses on migration, social stratification, and intergenerational mobility.

Elsbeth Graham is Professor Emerita in Geography at the University of St. Andrews, UK. Her research interests lie in the interrelated areas of population and health, with particular focus on the spatial aspects of population change and health variations. She has published widely on population topics, including low fertility and migration. She led the Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia (CHAMPSEA) project for over a decade and continues to play an active role in the CHAMPSEA research team.

Hustle and Run: Gender, Time and Postmaterial Values in Middle-Class Graduate Migration from China to Australia

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Education-related migration from the People's Republic of China to Australia usually entails sideways social mobility, insofar as it is connected with middle class families and individuals seeking to maintain existing class status rather than achieve upward mobility. This paper explores middle-class women's practices of "running" from China (*runxue*) in response to social involution or hustle culture (*neijuan*): that is, the increasing unlivability of urban life amid rampant overwork, labour precarity, exploitation and economic downturn. Findings from the in-process third phase of a longitudinal ethnographic and cultural study of a group of 50+ Chinese women who studied in Australia (2012-present) include the prevalence of re-valuations of lower-status labour, when highly qualified graduates take up (or aspire toward) unskilled or semi-skilled labour in Australia as a means of removing themselves from high-pressure work culture in China. While some of their job choices are shaped by Australia's immigration regime, others are conscious preferences based on the ideal of "working to live not living to work." Thus, while study abroad may be seen "as one more step to the ideal sequence" of self-advancement in Chinese society (Hansen 2015, 57-58), it also holds the potential to foster alternative forms of middle-class life and subjectivity. Graduate migrants' aspirations toward more relaxed, self-expressive, authentic lives and selves in Australia resonate with Nyíri and Beck's discussion of middle-class Chinese lifestyle migrants in Europe (2024); they also support Xiang's concept of the *personal self* as Chinese youths' response to hypermobility, disconnection, and uncertainty (2023). My analysis places particular emphasis on gendered aspects of these trends, including the comparative viability of such choices for women, whereas for men there may be greater pressure to obtain high-status work; and the seemingly paradoxical re-valuation of domestic carework by these professionally qualified migrant women.

Fran Martin is Professor of Cultural Studies and co-convenor of the Asian Cultural Research Hub at The University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on the transformations that globalization is wreaking in media, gender, sexuality and cultural identity across the transnational Chinese-speaking world. Fran is engaged in a multi-phase longitudinal study of the social and subjective experiences of fifty+ young women from China through the years of their university study in Australia and after. Fran's research also addresses television, film, literature, digital cultures and other forms of cultural production across Taiwan, the mainland People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and the worldwide Chinese diaspora. Her research monographs include *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Duke U.P., 2022), *Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Selfhood in Asia* (with T. Lewis and W. Sun, Duke U.P., 2016), *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Duke U.P., 2010), and *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong U.P., 2003).

‘The Dimmed Light in Her Eyes’: Home Ownership, Social Mobility Fantasy, and Youth (Dis)enchantment in China

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Facing grave macro-economic stress in post-covid years, escalated by rapid degree devaluation after two decades of higher education massification, China’s educated youth increasingly find a secure middle-class life unattainable, challenging their long-held and culturally-engrained belief in higher education as a pathway to social mobility. Emerging in this scene are popular tropes such as ‘Buddha-like youth’ (佛系青年) and ‘the lying-flat culture’ (躺平文化) that reject mainstream ideals of hard work, high ambition, and constant striving for success. Simultaneously, state-sector positions, such as those in civil service and education, have re-emerged as golden opportunities, attracting millions of recent graduates and re-entrants nationwide, suggesting continual vitality of conventional ideals of social mobility, despite narrowed pathways. Against such divergent trends, how do we understand young people’s negotiation of social mobility contemporary China? Based on over 800 video episodes of a young couple’s life posted in Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), I conduct a life history analysis of this rural-origin couple as they navigate the challenges of building a desirable urban life after completing their college education, including major milestones such as searching for jobs, starting a family, saving to buy an apartment in the provincial capital—which ended disastrously as it turned out to be an ‘unfinished property’ (烂尾) while draining their families’ incomes, returning to their home village to build a live-streaming business, which ultimately failed, and finally setting out on a new migration journey to Beijing in search of employment opportunities. Inspired by Foucault’s governmentality studies, I develop two concepts to capture the tension between these educated youth’s highly motivated, ambitious and self-disciplined pursuit of upward social mobility, and a highly volatile society governed by a logic which I characterize as neoliberal authoritarianism (Gu 2022). By ‘striving self’, I refer to a set of self-technologies that predispose youth to choreograph their migration/mobilities, career development, aspirations and personal identities in line with the dominant economic and political rationalities. By ‘bounded social mobility’, I refer to the condition whereby individuals’ propensities and capabilities of moving up the social ladder are constrained by broader, often ‘invisible’, structural factors. This study offers fresh perspectives towards understanding the rationales of action and subjectivities of China’s ‘lost-generation-to-be’ and explores the implications of these trends for its future social dynamics.

Xiaorong Gu is Lecturer in Childhood Studies at University of Suffolk. Trained as a sociologist of children and youth, she researches young people’s migration/mobilities, intergenerational relationships and their positioning vis-à-vis family, school and the state, with a focus on China and Asian societies in general. Her research article—“‘Save the Children!’: Governing Left-behind Children through Family in China’s Great Migration”—was shortlisted for the Annual SAGE Current Sociology Best Paper Prize in 2023. She guest edited two special issues, with *Child Indicators Research* (2021) and *Current Sociology* (2022) each, on the shifting valuation of children in contemporary Asian societies and the Global South at large. She co-edited *The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies* (2023) with Doris Bühler-Niederberger, Jessica Schmittek, and Elena Kim.

Migration Ability Acquisition through Servitude: How Male Filipino Youths Achieve the Triple Spatial, Life-Course, and Social Mobilities

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This paper examines how Filipino youths achieve what it calls triple mobilities – spatial (migration), life course (education to work, youth to adulthood), and social. It focuses specifically on male youths who, aspiring to become seafarers in the global maritime industry, work in abusive and exploitative servitude as unpaid ‘utility cadets’ (gofer or flunkey) for crewing agencies that supply seafarers to ship operators around the world in exchange for a ship placement. Framed within the aspiration/ability migration model and drawing on interviews with utility cadets, successful seafarers who were once utility cadets, and parents/family members, this paper conceptualizes the aspiring seafarers’ strategy of working for free as *ability acquisition* by which they use servitude to accumulate the *ability* to participate in international labour migration. It highlights how these young men turn their servitude into an *enabling mechanism* to match their migration ability with their migration aspiration.

Roderick Galam is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Oxford Brookes University with research interests in seafaring labour migration, youth transitions, and undocumented migrant domestic workers in the UK. Prior to joining Brookes, he was based at the Freie Universitaet Berlin where his research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG/German Research Foundation). He has held visiting research fellowships at Oxford University, Sheffield University, University of Bath, University of Hawaii Manoa, WZB Berlin Social Sciences Centre, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin. In 2024, he was a visiting professor at Universite Libre de Bruxelles.

Reconceptualising Transnational Marriage Migration through the Nexus of Social-Spatial Mobility

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While transnational marriage migration is often assumed as a path to upward mobility for women from poorer countries migrating to marry men in richer ones, as the notion of “global hypergamy” suggests, recent research in the intra-Asia context has revealed how gendered mobility and family regimes generate myriad constraints for marriage migrant women, immobilising them within their reproductive roles in the family. However, thus far relatively less attention has been paid to marriage migrants’ social mobility aspirations and strategies. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 44 East and Southeast Asian migrant wives from both the lower- and higher-income cross-national families in Singapore, this paper deploys an intersectional lens of socio-spatial mobility to examine the ways in which the women improve socio-economic status in and beyond the host country. First, they actively navigate the ethicised opportunity structures in Singapore’s multicultural society and pursue intra- and inter-generational mobility through strategic ethnicised integration. Second, they plan for a retirement in their home countries as a way to achieve a better quality of life in their old ages.

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Middle-Class Expatriation in Qatar: Performing Belonging, Performing Class

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In the Arabian Gulf, ethnicity and nationality are central organizing principles in the governance of labor migration. There is however a need to examine the classed nature of the expatriate population. The GCC is characterized by exceptionally large percentages of migrant workers, as well as the infamous *kafala* system which outsources the management of migrant workers to private citizens and businesses. While the governing structure is structured along ethnicity-based principles, these also produce specific classed formations.

This paper examines how “class-in-transit” may unfold by focusing on middle class, long-term Egyptian expatriates in Qatar. While their migration often leads to upwards social mobility, their class status becomes dependent on their ability to continuously reproduce their residence within the emirate. Further, the ability to claim belonging is tied to the continuous performance and impression management as middle class. In part their class status is precarious due to the temporary nature of their residency (despite many of my interlocutors are so-called “Qatar-born”), and in part due to their national identity as Egyptians leaving them at risk for mistaken class-identity. Within the class-segmented city of Doha, mistaken class identity may lead to discrimination and physical exclusion from spaces of leisure and consumption. And while most of the research participants claim to experience what has been termed “belonging-despite-exclusion”, that claim of belonging is often tied to the classed spaces they risk rejection from.

The paper is based on 9 months fieldwork in Doha, Qatar throughout 2017. Relying mostly on participant observation, these data are supplemented by repeat, in-depth life story interviews, as well as a small number of semi-structured interviews. Working mostly with Egyptian expats, access was facilitated by prior fieldwork experience in Cairo, which further meant the opportunity to “follow” some interlocutors into expatriation, and back again.

Mari Norbakk is a tenure track postdoctoral researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. She earned her PhD in Social Anthropology at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen. She identifies as a nascent economic anthropologist and her work tends to engage with the intersections of identity, migration and economic practices. Her current research is concerned with refugee and immigrant entrepreneurship in Norway and within the Sudanese community in Egypt. Her thematic interests include gender, specifically men and masculinities, labor migration, economic inclusion, entrepreneurship and more recently indebtedness. Her work also spans applied and commissioned work and she has been involved in work with Norwegian gender and development policy, as well as evaluations of Norwegian aid.

Moving On, Moving Out, and Moving Up?: A Genealogy of Spatial and Social Mobility

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“The point is that change of occupation, personal success or failure—changes of economic and social status, in short—tend to be registered in changes of location.”

The Concept of Position in Sociology, Robert Park (1925).

While mobility is primarily a spatial term – denoting the act of changing location in physical space – it is often conflated with the more metaphorical change in social position. In this presentation I will theorise the relationship between spatial and social mobility at a number of scales and in different registers. While the Chicago School of Sociology famously equated moving out from the inner city to the suburbs as simultaneously moving up the social order, scholars of international migration have stereotypically seen the causes of migration as connected to the search for a better life. Both formulations remain sedentarist in their orientations, focusing more on the places left and arrived at than on the act of moving itself. Mobility itself (how, when, how often, how fast etc.) is also a social differentiator, creating “kinetic hierarchies” through the separation of citizens from vagabonds. The very word “mobility” has roots in the archaic *mobile*, an abbreviated form of the Latin *mobile vulgus*—the disorderly and excitable crowd—the “mob”. This meaning of mobility was also present in the writings of the Chicago School where excessive mobility in the inner city—the zone in transition—was seen as a symptom of wider moral disorder. This presentation will explore these connections between the social and spatial through the term mobility considering the experience of living in the 21st Century.

Tim Cresswell is Ogilvie Professor of Geography at the University of Edinburgh. He is a cultural geographer by training, and the author or editor of a dozen books and over 100 articles on the role of space, place and mobility in social and cultural life. He has PhDs in Geography (Wisconsin) and Creative Writing (Royal Holloway, University of London). Cresswell is also a widely published poet with three collections, most recently *Plastiglomerate* (Penned in the Margins, 2020). His most recent academic books include *Maxwell Street: Writing and Thinking Place* published in 2019 by the University of Chicago Press, *Moving Towards Transition* published by Zed Books (co-authored) in 2021 and *Muybridge and Mobility* published by University of California Press (co-authored) in 2022. His research focuses on place and mobility and their role in the constitution of social and cultural life.

Mobilizing Imagined Futures: Transnational Discourses of Social Mobility among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia and Resettled Rohingya in Chicago

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Discussions surrounding refugee mobility often emphasize the struggles of refugees in precarious conditions in a neoliberal citizenship regime. Instead, this paper centers refugee's aspirations for social mobility as everyday projects of world-making. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with resettled Rohingya in Chicago and Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, this paper investigates how traveling discourses of social mobility co-constitute refugee's notions of the "good life" (Mattingly 2014). Although in conversations predating 2020 when Rohingya in Malaysia have expressed hesitancy to resettle in the West citing seeming cultural-religious differences, the growing resettlement of Rohingya in the US since then appears to have convinced them otherwise. First, I explore Rohingya beliefs surrounding access (real or imagined) to social welfare and capital for upward social mobility of those resettled in the U.S. While many Rohingya interlocutors in Chicago are low-wage laborers—if not, unemployed—talks about their aspirations and everyday experiences reach those in Malaysia, reconfiguring the latter's imaginings of a good life in and beyond Malaysia. As Rohingya navigate the constraints of their refugee condition by mobilizing their imaginings of the future, this paper also attends to their socioreligious anxieties and how they reconcile religious notions of worldly life with neoliberal aspirations for upward mobility. Finally, I attend to Rohingya everyday discourses that draw parallels between the rights afforded by the Islamic Malaysian state vis-à-vis non-Islamic countries like the US. I look at how these transnational discourses shape Rohingya ideas of citizenship regimes, religio-political communities, as well as disrupt notions and everyday performances of the "grateful refugee." By investigating Rohingya emergent worldmaking projects in state/s of limbo, this paper seeks to demonstrate how spatio-temporal and imagined ideas of social mobility may reveal the larger workings of the global political economy, while rethinking what social mobility could look like in conditions of refugeehood.

Nursyazwani is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation research is situated at the anthropological interfaces of sovereignty, migration and religion, to examine the world-making practices among displaced Rohingya individuals and communities on the peripheries of ummah, the global Muslim community. Through ethnographic research with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, resettled Rohingya in Chicago, and Rohingya online communities, her comparative study traces inter-scalar modes of Rohingya world-making across different political, embodied, transnational, and spiritual domains. She has been working with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia since 2017, resettled Rohingya refugees in Chicago since 2021, and has undertaken online ethnography of Rohingya discourses on digital platforms since 2020. She received her M.Soc.Sci. from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at National University of Singapore, where her research focused on the co-construction of refugee legibility among Rohingya in Malaysia. Previously, she was a research associate at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

Middling Migration from Unstable Contexts: How Digital Migration Brokers from Türkiye (Re)present Class and Social Mobility for Potential Middle-Class Migrants?

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As part of a larger research agenda exploring how social media usage informs, mediates, and shapes the migration or stay aspirations of potential highly skilled migrants from Türkiye, this paper provides a class-informed analysis of migration-related messages disseminated in social media. There is a growing research body on middling migration referring to the outmigration of middle classes, who are not privileged elites but resourced with skills and knowledge to navigate structural constraints, driven by choice and the motivation for self-actualisation, class-related aspirations rather than economic or security related necessities. Türkiye, with its large and relatively young and educated population, offers a crucial case to examine how the middle classes, with skills desired in the global market, respond to political and economic uncertainties. As a methodological and empirical novelty, I focus on digital migration brokers—actors who disseminate information and advisory digital content on migration experience. Contributing to debates on migration decision-making and digital migration studies, the paper analyses how social media content and digital migration brokers present possibilities and limitations for social mobility through migration. The findings are based on a digital ethnography following 14 social media accounts in Germany, producing knowledge in Turkish on emigration from Türkiye and life abroad. It is widely established that migration aspirations and decision-making are shaped by both negative and positive feedback circulated through the migration networks. There is less discussion on the content of this feedback in relation to upward and downward social mobility prospects for potential migrants. The paper reiterates that the use of social media before, during, and after migration is a form of transnational feedback mechanism, blurring the line between public and private, commercial and non-commercial, personal and professional.

Ayşen Üstübici received her PhD from the University of Amsterdam and Koç University (joint doctorate) in 2015 and is currently Associate Professor at the Departments of International Relations and Sociology at Koç University. She is a member of the executive board of the Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc) and editor of the journal *International Migration*. She has studied patterns of incorporations for individuals occupying fragile positions in society, including migrants with precarious legal status, and examined factors affecting their future aspirations. She has recently started a research project on migration and stay aspirations of middle-classes in Turkey and their use of social media. Her academic work has been published in outlets such as *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Geopolitics*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Disasters*, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, and *Comparative Migration Studies*, among others. Her research has also been supported by funding institutions such as EU Horizon 2020, IPC-Stiftung Mercator, Volkswagen Stiftung Foundation, TÜBİTAK, and Zeit Stiftung Bucerius.

Linked Lives and the Shaping of Social Mobility in Asia

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Research on the interplay between migration and social mobility demonstrates the roles of international migration as an economic strategy, foregrounding remittances. Meanwhile, although rural-to-urban migration is generally assumed to be relevant for social mobility, there is less research documenting interactions of internal migration and social mobility. Similarly, less systematic analysis has been conducted of how multiple instances of migration, over several generations, can matter for families' trajectories of upward social mobility. This paper develops conceptual and methodological frames for understanding the relationality of processes that underpin interactions of migration and social mobility. We ask: How can we understand the interactions of social and spatial mobility more relationally? That is, how are histories of moving and staying connected to the dynamics of social mobility within the intergenerational family? We mobilise the concept of 'linked lives' to develop the 'family history' as an analytical viewpoint to examine these interactions. We draw on the case of intergenerational families in Asian cities, which feature rapid urbanisation, the growth of middle classes and diverse migration patterns. Building on 106 family history interviews with middle-class families in four Asian cities—Hanoi, Manila, Mumbai and Karachi—we examine families' histories of internal and international migration and their narratives of becoming middle-class. We first show how the concept of linked lives highlights interdependent relationships in family migration histories. Second, we consider how linked lives illuminate the relationships between migration histories in the family and narratives of upward social mobility, especially in accessing education, employment and financial stability. Third, we analyse how family migration histories also reveal shared experiences of disruptive events that mark journeys of social mobility, *and* also the possibilities of recovery and resilience. We argue that intergenerational linked lives *and* migration histories across space, time and the life course are co-constitutive processes that shape social mobility.

Karen Liao is Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo and works on the qualitative component of the MigrationRhythms project. She is a human geographer with an interdisciplinary background and a research focus on migration and development in Asia. She completed her PhD in Geography at the National University of Singapore, where her research investigated labour migration governance in the Philippines and the return and repatriation of migrant workers during crises and disruptions. She was also previously Research Associate at the Scalabrini Migration Center, where she worked on projects related to: temporary migration in the Europe-Philippines corridor; youth, employment and migration; Filipino professional and skilled migrants; and migrant and multicultural children in Asia. She has published in journals such as *International Migration Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *International Migration* and *Geoforum*.

Marta Bivand Erdal is Research Professor in Migration Studies at Peace Research Institute Oslo, where she is Co-Director of the PRIO Migration Center. As a human geographer she is interested in the impacts of migration and transnationalism in both emigration and immigration contexts. Her research is about migration, development and remittances, and about living together in societies shaped by migration-related diversity. Marta's work draws on interview, focus group, and survey data, paying critical attention to the use of categories. She has published extensively within and beyond migration studies and regularly engages with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. She is currently (2021-2026) investigating connections between migration—of different durations and distances—and social mobility into the middle classes in Asia, in the ERC funded research project "Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Upward Social Mobility in Asia".

Inheriting Mobilities: Aspirations, Journeys, and Legacies across Generations

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I offer an ethnographic theory of 'inheritance' and the migration-social mobility nexus. Inheritance encompasses the meanings attached by ordinary people to migration and upward mobility; the relational infrastructures that enable them; and the consequences of becoming middle class, especially for people's personhood, kinship universes, and futures. Inheritance emplaces migration and social mobility within intimate histories of aspirations, while attending to broader political-economic shifts. Kinship here propels journeys across class and space, but is marked by heightened potential for ambivalence and enmities.

My account is anchored on a decade-long study (2014-24) of upward mobility in a formerly agrarian village in Iloilo, Philippines. Combining biographical and family history interviews, participant observation in everyday life, and archival research, this longitudinal study examines the post-1945 generation's experiences in relation to that of their forebears and successors. I focus here on an extended family considered by their peers as exemplars of mobility. I relate the aspirations and journeys of a woman born in the late 1950s and her nephew who was born four decades later.

For the aunt and her contemporaries, upward mobility was defined as the achievement of new bequests (mainly schooling and professional occupations) amid landlessness. These legacies enabled, and even required, unprecedented migration. In the 1980s, defying her elders, the aunt migrated as a nurse to the Middle East, and later, the US, thus transforming her personhood and status within the family. Over time, migration itself has become an inheritance that shapes the succeeding generation's life chances. While the nephew and his contemporaries have benefitted from their predecessors' achievements, they contend with entrenched expectations of mobility. Particular career and migration pathways now 'run in the family'. They reckon with other, less positive legacies, too: geographical dispersal, increased inequalities, and ruptures in family ties. Their inheritance includes the shadows of mobility.

Resto Cruz is Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh where he co-convenes the Kinship: More or Less research hub. His work centres on how lives and relationships unfold over time, the traces that accumulate in their wake, and how they are shaped by, and generate, wider historical transformations. He has conducted ethnographic and archival research in the Philippines and the United Kingdom. His current book project examines how kinship ties, particularly parent-child ties and siblingship, propelled, and were altered by, upward mobility. The book does so by tracing the emergence and transformation of different kinds of inheritance, their implications for persons and their relations, and their resonances in contemporary public culture. Prior to his current appointment, he was Research Associate at the Morgan Centre for the Study of Everyday Life at the University of Manchester, where he was part of an interdisciplinary study of girlhood, youth, and later life among women in the UK born between 1939 and 1952. His publications have appeared in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*; *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*; *The Sociological Review*; *History of the Human Sciences*; *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*; and *The Cambridge Handbook for the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality*. In 2025, he will be a fellow at inherit: Heritage in Transformation, a centre for advanced study based at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Being Born Poor is Irrelevant: A Discussion on the Social-Mobility-Driven Agency of Non-privileged Chinese International Students in their Post-graduation Returning Employment Trajectories

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The current backdrop constantly reminds us of the temporality and uncertainty of the "class"—a fluid concept, subject to change rather than being a predetermined fate. Therefore, this study examines international student mobility (ISM) as a space where social structure and individual agency interact, specifically by conducting semi-structured interviews with 39 disadvantaged (low-income household) Chinese international students holding UK master degree and have worked at domestic labour market within 10 years. Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework and the debate, it investigates why non-privileged individuals pursue ISM, how they adjust their habitus to navigate this path, and the implications of such transformations for social mobility. This study firstly suggest that structural inequalities, such as disparities in educational resources and familial employment support, may stimulate personal social-mobility-driven agency and guidance agency by visualising viable pathways for practice. Under such logics, international education mobility has emerged as a key strategy in the agency-driven effort to reshape disadvantaged group's social mobility trajectory. Secondly, the exercise of agency in pursuing transnational education—a pathway more align with the advantaged habitus—often leads to individual's habitus transformation, yet they may face dual challenges—internal conflicts between the ingrained habitus and new social expectations, and external pressures from family and social norms resisting their mobility. Lastly, ISM among non-advantaged individuals positively contributes to their social mobility by on the one hand enabling their capital accumulation and employment competitiveness, and on the other hand by exposing them to new social disparities, which further intensify their agency and direct their practices. To note, such agency formation process are not simply romanticised narratives of personal effort or the triumph of individual willpower, but rather are constructed within the nexus of perceived limitations and opportunities. Therefore, this study also highlights that the social mobility of these disadvantaged students does not signify a fundamental transformation of unequal relationships. Instead, their mobility aligns with the existing resources distribution and capital accumulation modes within these fields, thereby, to some extent, perpetuating or even reinforcing the established unequal structures embedded in these fields. By exploring the disadvantaged' ISM, this study stresses the need for a more nuanced comprehension of life course—an approach that acts as a counterweight to the simplistic meritocratic or neoliberal narratives by exploring how agency and structure influence each other in the formation of personal practice.

Chu Liu is a third year PhD student at the University College London in human geography. She mainly focuses on international student mobility with particular interest in the interaction between migration, higher education, social class, gender and labour market outcomes. Her researches are mainly qualitative (e.g., interview and discourse analysis) based and interdisciplinary, combining geo-political, economic, sociological, sustainable development and educational insights to analyse topics concerning international students from both macro-national and micro-individual perspectives. In addition, she is also interested in using big data in social science research and technology's role in social inequalities. Meanwhile, she is also keen to participate in academic activities such as international conferences and paper publication.

Navigating Neoliberal Aspirations: Middle-Class Indian Students and the Global Education Landscape

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This paper critically examines the socio-cultural and economic forces shaping the international migration of middle-class Indian students, particularly in the domain of educational mobility. As India emerges as the world's second-largest sender of international students, this migration trend represents a mechanism through which aspiring Indian youth navigate entrenched structural inequalities and socio-economic pressures. Drawing on interviews with 20 migration agencies in Delhi, Chennai, Kochi, and Trivandrum, as well as ethnographic observations at educational fairs, the study examines how recruiters leverage student aspirations. The study further incorporates in-depth interviews with 28 participants—14 prospective students and 14 current students abroad facilitated by intermediaries to explore the nuanced interplay of personal ambitions and familial obligations that propel educational migration. These narratives reveal how socio-cultural expectations and neoliberal ideals of success intersect within the migration trajectories of the Indian middle class, casting migration as both an individual pursuit and an avenue for fulfilling intergenerational social mobility aspirations.

Educational migration is thus framed as a dual construct: a personal venture into global opportunity aligned with neoliberal ambitions and a response to socio-familial pressures inherent to the Indian middle class. This duality positions students in a liminal space where dichotomies—rural-urban, wealth-poverty, tradition-modernity—merge, creating tensions between the promises of globalization and the realities they encounter. Migration intermediaries, or recruiters, exploit these aspirations, promoting Western education as a pathway to upward mobility, though the outcomes frequently do not align with these ideals. By critically engaging with the narratives and strategies of recruitment agencies, this paper uncovers the inherent contradictions in the valorization of educational migration. This research contributes to the broader understanding of international educational migration as a complex, stratified process, where migration intermediaries play a pivotal role in shaping aspirations, often trapping middle-class students in a precarious limbo between expectation and reality.

Anand Panamthottam Cherian is currently pursuing his doctoral studies at George Mason University, where he serves as a graduate researcher at the Institute for Immigration Research. His research primarily focuses on migration, with a particular emphasis on student mobility. He also holds the position of Affiliated Research Fellow at the International Institute of Migration and Development. Previously, Anand was a research associate at the Centre for Development Studies, where he made significant contributions to large-scale migration studies, notably the Kerala Migration Survey. His scholarly output includes peer-reviewed articles and book chapters that address critical issues such as student mobility, migrant labor, and housing. Anand is adept in both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, including survey design and data analysis. Additionally, he is multilingual, with fluency in English, Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam.

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