

# The “Transnational Turn” in Humanity and Social Science Research: Reflections from Singapore<sup>1</sup>

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In this article, I consider how transnational forces and processes have produced immense impacts across our academic disciplines and suggest that the future of research in humanities and social sciences is profoundly determined or shaped by the growing transnational phenomena across international borders. I argue that the present-perfect tense of the research in the fields of humanities and social sciences cannot neglect the forceful emergence of transnational approach. In the twenty-first century, scholars can no longer confine the subject of their investigation to the limited space and imagination of the local or national. It is time to broaden our scope of study and deepen our understanding

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by relocating and reframing our subject of inquiry in the interconnected processes of transnationalization. If the most influential keyword of the humanity and social science scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century was “nationalism” (Anderson 1991), I believe “transnationalism” is the rising-star concept across disciplines at least in the first half of the twenty-first century.

This article is divided into three parts. I begin with some background discussion of transnational routes connecting and facilitating border-crossing movements and contacts across cities in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. I wish to emphasize how transnationalism has assumed localized forms of cultural practices. Next, I proceed to provide some detailed discussion on the topics of Thai migrants in Singapore, showing categories of men, women, and monks engaging in migrant employments and diasporic lives in the global city-state of Singapore. Their life and work have exemplified what transnationalism actually means in their attempts to keep feet in both worlds of homeland and host-land. Finally, I return to discuss the implications of the “transnational turn” through the case study of Thai migrants in Singapore. I demonstrate some conceptual approach involving the place of transnationalism in the research of humanity and social science in the contexts of Southeast Asian Studies.

## **The “Transnational Turn” and Singapore**

By transnationalism, I mean individualized or institutionalized human transactions that reach beyond or transcend national boundaries. Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc (1994) take “transnationalism” as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders”. In this respect, transnationalization includes the multi-directional flows or movements of people, technology, capital, media representations, and political ideologies across international borders at unprecedented speed and quantity (Appadurai 1990). It entails dynamic and complex processes, which could be subsumed under the globalization as both are defined by similar acceleration and intensification of interconnectivity and mobility particularly in the post-Cold War world.

The social life of our world today is increasingly transnational and I truly realized the transnational effects when I have become a diasporic Thai scholar in Singapore. Like most countries in the region, Singapore is a special place positioning itself at the heart of globalization waves and instantly stimulating its people to respond to the ever-presenting transnational economic and sociocultural trends from afar. Forms of moving subjects and patterns of transnational mobilities over spatial and temporal arrangements are one of strong research fields across humanity and social science disciplines at NUS. I was attracted into this growing scholarly trend as soon as I started my work there 6 years ago. My international colleagues are busy carrying out projects and organizing series of conferences and seminars on topics and issues like transnational marriage and families, forms of mobilities, human trafficking, care economy, global cities, and the like.

Transnationalism takes its turn in the research in the fields of humanity and social sciences in Singapore with some obvious reasons. First, Singapore was built by transnational immigrants and settlers. Movements of people, commodities, and ideas were very important to the rise of Singapore since its inception in the first half of the nineteenth century. This city-state has emerged out of the transnational economic and political forces since its colonial days (Warren 2003). Second, Singapore is a country of self-insufficiency, meaning it cannot survive by itself due to food and other natural resource scarcity. It has been a trade-dependent city-state. Therefore, the transnational flows of labour, goods, technologies, and ideas are very important to its survival. Third, Singapore is the country in need of labour forces. With a very small, yet ethnically diverse population, Singapore needs to import foreign talents and workers. As the country has recently experienced population replacement crisis, Singapore has encouraged the in-flows of foreigners of different qualifications to its shores in order to help shoulder its impressive economic growth. Transnationalism has thus become a fact of life as well as an influential intellectual norm in Singapore.

### **Bangkok, Hat Yai, KL, JB, and Singapore: An Overland Transnational Route**

In the book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Clifford (1997:3) reminds us how culture is made and remade through the practices of human mobilities and travels. According to him, “virtually everywhere one looks, the processes of human movement and encounter are long-established and complex, cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things”. In contrast to a conventional assumption in cultural anthropology and other disciplines,

Clifford suggests that people are moving subjects. Their society and culture are continuously constructed not only through acts of dwelling over geographical spaces and times, but also acts of travelling and contacting with others away from home. He argues that “cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, and locales” (Clifford 1997:7).

Clifford’s call for some serious attention to the “entanglement at intersecting regional, national, and transnational levels” is valid in the ever-increasing globalizing worlds of Southeast Asia and beyond. In early May 2009, I was involved in the documentary production team focusing on the issues of human trafficking from Thailand to Malaysia and Singapore sponsored by the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore. My Thai Embassy colleagues and I travelled from Singapore to Hat Yai through checkpoints at borders and key transit towns and cities such as Johor Bahru, Kuala Lumpur, and Dan Sadao. We planned our trip itineraries based on the information we learned from a young Thai woman, named Srisuda (pseudo name), who was involved in transnational sex work in the past three years (see her story in the next section). We rent a private van and took a long ride, reversing the South-bound route from Singapore to its Northern neighbours, Malaysia and Thailand. Following the bus lines between Singapore-KL-Hat Yai, we learned from the official records that this transnational route is one of the busiest transportation modes, which facilitates transnational movements of people, like construction workers, monks, sex workers, tourists, and other travellers across the international borders.

Travels or acts of human movement are the hallmarks of transnational transactions. However, human movements, particularly journeys across borders of modern nation-states, are subject to geopolitical surveillance and control. They assume many forms and patterns. They are also closely linked to the localized forms of travelling cultures. As the purpose of our trip was to trace

the overland routes of human trafficking in women and workers from Thailand to Singapore, I started realizing how transnational mobility is perceived and practiced on the ground. From our first stop in Johor Bahru after passing through the Woodlands Checkpoints from Singapore's side, our camera men and I were competing to aim our cameras at similar subjects, such as checkpoint structures, bus terminals, food centres and restaurants, and entertainment establishments (e.g., karaoke bars, pubs, discotheques). These observable buildings and signs along the border towns constitute the unmistakable geographies of transnational movements. They function as transit points as well as contact zones for both arriving and departing passengers. They also facilitate initiate contacts between travellers and local people through different economic and cultural transactions.

Cities and towns are nodes of human networks along the transnational routes. As my colleagues and I travelled from Singapore to JB, KL, to Hat Yai, I felt that highway networks linking these three countries could be taken beyond its physical structures. They are the roads that transport border-crossing people back and forth. When one takes a look of the map of this part of Southeast Asian peninsular, it is hardly mistaken that intensive networks of communication and transportation at the regional level are centred on the three global cities of Bangkok, KL, and Singapore. The regional global cities pull in labours and resources from the national as well as transnational rural hinterlands in order to fill in low-paid jobs and other migrant employments in the city-scapes. The existence of smaller border provincial towns, like Hat Yai and JB, are meant to help facilitating human movements and other smaller sizes of contacts and transactions. Mobilities among ordinary people, whose livelihoods depends on their border-crossing low-paid employments and jobs away from home, make these nodal networks some genuine subjects of transnational studies. Working-age men and women take these transnational routes in order to seek for employment and better life, which they believe cannot be fulfilled by dwelling and earn their living at home.



## Srisuda's Journey

In January 2009, Srisuda was arrested by Singapore police while she was “providing sexual services” (*khai borikan thang phet*) to foreign workers in a forest brothel in Singapore. She was prosecuted but her case was rather complicated. With assistance of the officials from the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore, she was transferred to a rescue home while she had to stay longer in Singapore. She has been detained and charged with an accusation of offering bribe to the officials on duty. Here the bribe was taken in the form of sexual service.

Srisuda wrote a diary, telling her life story as a Thai migrant woman and a sex worker who has deeply involved with human mobility and human trafficking for sex from the Mekong hinterland or the Northeastern Thailand to Singapore. Srisuda's diary is very personal, but with her permission I take it as exceptional auto-ethnographic accounts of complex human experience of trafficking in persons from the hinterlands of Mekong to three major Southeast Asia's global cities of Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. In Geertzian's terminology, Srisuda's diary accounts can be seen as “the stories she tells herself about herself” (Geertz 1973:448) and the stories she tells herself and certain audiences about the mobile world she has been through. I learned about her roots and routes in her own words through the following excerpts from her diary, starting from the eventful night which forever changed her life.

“Everything I wrote in this diary is the truth. I entered Singapore four times and the fourth trip was on 17 December 2008. I had a one-month [social visit] visa stamped on my passport, so I must leave the country before 15 January 2009. I came as a tourist, but I sold sex in Singapore. I know many friends who do the same kind of work. I know that if I were arrested, I would be jailed for one week and deported back to Thailand. My passport would be also blacklisted. I would be barred to come back to Singapore for three years or more.

On Monday 6 January 2009 around 10.00 p.m., I worked at a forest site in Woodlands, Lane 4. My friends suddenly shouted, the Police. I was with my fourth customer of that night. He was a worker from India. He had not finished his business yet, but I rushed him as he went beyond time limit of ten minutes for his twenty SG dollar fee. I told him to stop and put on my clothes. I had to run through the dark into the forest. I ran for a while, but I felt I was too tired. The forest was also thick and I did not see the track well. I tripped and fell. I tried to look for a place to hide. From where I stayed put, I heard the movements of people. I thought there were many police and commandos. A flashlight was pointed to me and a man in military uniform walked to me. I was frightened and really thought that this man is a commando force which I heard so much about.

The police who found and arrested her asked: “where are your friends?” I replied, “I don’t know. I am busy running.” The police used the flashlight to search for more women. Later he turned Srisuda to the second police to walk me out. When the second police was alone with me, he behaved strangely. I knew by instinct what would happen next, so I said, “No go, no go”. After that the second police harassed me by touching my breast and trying to pull down my pants. I tried to resist. The police told me that “you want to go to the police station or you want a fuck and go. I am fast, fast.” I hesitated, but thought about the offer. I was afraid that he would give me a false promise. So I told him, “I want to go to the Police Station”.



When we walked for a while, I suddenly changed her mind and asked him that “You fuck me, no lock me la. No go police station, sure?” He said, “No” and then attempted to have sex with me on spot. I had to cooperate. He had sex with me in standing position. He pulled down my shorts and did the same to his. His uniform long pants were pulled down, but not completely removed. He entered me from my back. He spent only 1 or 2 minutes. His semen spilt over and flew down my legs.

That police left and I stayed put on that spot for a while. However, a group of the police found me and arrested me moments later. I was shocked because one member in that police unit was the man who just had sex with me with a promise to let me go. I was so angry and resent. I felt I was cheated. Son of a bitch!”

Srisuda and a group of Thai women were taken to Jurong Police Station. She was angry because that police did not honor his promise. She was also upset because of her first hand experience of a malpractice by a Singapore law enforcer. In the company with Thai women, she asked around whether any of her friends were put in the same situation. None of them had sex with the police during the raid. She thought it over and decided to tell her story to a Thai translator. She believed that she had revealed the truth.

Srisuda was further investigated by officials from Corruption Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). She said the sexual intercourses with customers during her work and with the police were two days old. She had not taken a bath while she was detained. That police did not use a condom. Her shirt and short which she wore that night were seized by CPIB officials. She was

sent to the National University Hospital (NUH) for DNA test and check-up. She was arranged to help Singapore authorities identify the police who had sex with her. She was sent to a shelter run by Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (HOME) on 9 January 2009.

Srisuda's diary further reveals many complex aspects of her biography as much as realities pertinent to human trafficking situations from Mekong to Singapore. She was among waves of women escaping poverty from countries like China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam to more prosperous neighboring countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Srisuda was born in a rural village, but her family moved to Chachengsao in Eastern Thailand. They have some farm lands there. She grew up in a broken home. Her father left for her mother, so her mother re-married her stepfather who already had two children. She finished Grade 9 (Matthayom 3) and went to find a job in near Lad Krabang Industrial Estate, Bangkok. She worked as a saleswoman for a hardware and electric store in order to earn a living and send some money to her family. When she was 18 years old, she managed to support herself to study marketing at a private vocational school in Bangkok. She worked in the day time and studied at night.

Srisuda admitted in her diary that she had negative attitudes toward men. She hated her father who neglected her mother and her family when she was young. She has some bitter memory over her first boyfriend who had abandoned left her when his family learned about her humble background. She also had an abortion with her second live-in boyfriend. When she was 19 years old, Srisuda's life took a radical turn when her first boyfriend left her. She quit her job and took a break from study. With a friend's encouragement, she went to work as a waitress in a Karaoke bar in Southern Thailand. She had to go out with customers. She spent only a short stint in the South before heading back to Bangkok. This time she had fully involved in night-time sex

work in Karaoke bars in Saphan Khwai and New Phetburi. She went out with customers and was paid 1,000 baht per one-time sexual service. She learned how to drink and use drug. Working hours are from 10:30 to 6.00 a.m. She liked her job because she could earn an average of 4,000-5,000 Baht per night. In some good night, she made up to 10,000 Baht. Srisuda met her live-in boyfriend. She was pregnant, but had to get herself aborted because both her boyfriend and herself were not ready to start a family.

Srisuda's life had gone from worse to worst after the abortion of her first pregnancy. She believed it was truly a sinful act. Only months later in Bangkok, she was arrested for possessing and using marijuana. It was a minor offense. She was lucky that the Court did not sentence her to imprisonment. The Court ordered her to be under 2-year probation. Srisuda had accumulated some bad habit of shopping and using money carelessly. She thought money was easy to earn. Soon she found herself deep in debts as she had to borrow from private loan sharks when she was short of income. Her boyfriend had to spend some times in Buddhist monkhood. She then separated from her boyfriend. She later on learned that she was pregnant again. This time she decided to keep the baby. When she gave birth to a baby boy, her boyfriend returned to her and took care of her family. However, Srisuda felt she cannot stay home as a housewife and a mother. She cannot stand the fact that she had no job and had to rely on her husband. She decided to leave her baby to her mother in Chachengsao and returned to Bangkok once again. She realized that she needs to work and save money for her family.

Travelling to work abroad is always Srisuda's dream. She had some contacts from friends, who encouraged her to go abroad and do some sex work in Malaysia and Singapore. Her friend working in Sukhumvit gave her a female contact in Hat Yai. She calls the contact lady of the contact mother (mae tact). In the past three years, Srisuda's life has dealt with intensive travels

across borders and moving from Bangkok to Hat Yai, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. She has become an experienced sex worker. She has accumulated vast knowledge of networks and natures of sex works in different cities. She learned that there are two options for her to work in Malaysia and Singapore: 1) if she uses her own money to travel, obtain travel document, and stay in SG, the contact person/agent will charge her only 50 services (approximately  $20 \times 50 = 1,000\text{SGD}$ ) and 2) if she decides to depend on the contact person/agent, she need to pay back twice as much.

Moving down South from Kuala Lumpur to Johor Bahru, Srisuda had come to work in forest brothels in Singapore for a total of 4 times in 2007 and 2008.. The durations of her stay varied, depending on Singapore's Immigration and Checkpoint Authority (ICA) officials who interviewed her at the Woodlands Checkpoints. She was aware of working conditions in Singapore. She knew that law enforcement is very strict. She has to work in some forest brothels servicing foreign workers, including those from China, India and Bangladesh. Working conditions are far from perfect. There are no proper toilets or bedrooms. The male agents or primps provided some make shift tents, buckets of water, drinking water, mosquito coils, and rolls of tissue paper. She had to prepared condoms and her own towels and other personal belongings. She once told me that "I bought several big packs of condom at a time. I need to use them when I work. I definitely refuse to service any man without using condom". She also learned things in advance that she has to provide sexual service to 10-20 customers/men per night with a cost of 20 SG\$ per one sexual service. In her first trip, she had to pay 1,500 Baht for a one-way bus ticket and another 1,000 Baht for a tour guide, who provided her a company and instructions. She had managed to avoid the problems with Singapore authorities until she was arrested in January this year.

Srisuda's journeys from Mekong's hinterland to the region's top global

cities were facilitated by networks of people, who have taken the same routes and adopted the same likelihood. The authorities and anti-human trafficking activists might want to call them, traffickers. However, for young women like Srisuda, they are people with some anonymous identity and liminal transborder status. They are suspicious people, but her journey abroad has to depend on them. They are the people in her connections. Some are friends of friends, others are front contact persons. Two main groups of people which she has to deal with in order to travel across the borders are: 1) female contact agent (*mae tack*) and 2) male agent (*ayen phuying*). The *mae tack*, literally, the mother of contact as well as verbal contractual agreement, persons are mostly veteran sex workers who have established some contacts with foreign agencies in the host countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. They function like job placement agencies in the regular overseas workers recruitment process. *Mae tack* make some profits by bringing women for sex work and charge them for their services. They help their new recruits to produce necessary travel documents, facilitate their trips, provide lodgings and meals, and supervise them at work. The *ayen phuying*, literally, the agent of female sex workers, are front men taking care of on-site sex work, mostly in forested areas near dormitories for foreign workers in many places around the Island of Singapore. The *ayen phuying* are experienced and influential construction workers. They know their local areas well and are capable to setting make-shift forest brothels for their nighttime business. They also prepare necessary equipments such as tents, mattresses, buckets of water, etc. Some of them are widely known with personal and telephone contacts with the *mae tack*. Others have developed some love relationships with the sex workers.

Being the *ayen phuying* must be brave and tough. They must be ready to provide protection to their women when they encounter with trouble-making clients, while they must be discreet enough to spread words to their potential

clients and fellow workers to support the business. Srisuda told me during one of our interviews that “it is quite easy to contact my *ayen phuying* when I was in Singapore. I just gave them a call. “Brother, can I go and work at your place tonight?” We just make an agreement that they prepare the place and I have to pay them 20 SG\$ for every 3 customer using my service. The *ayen phuying* usually alarm me if there are some strangers around, rumors of police raids, or bad weather, e.g., rain or storm. They also give me an advice when is the best time for business, which is usually during the pay-day night”.

Srisuda’s journeys down-south are indeed the movements from towns to cities or from smaller cities to global cities. From Bangkok, she went to Hat Yai, Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, and Singapore. It is the cities’ networks that host and facilitate Srisuda’s cross-border livelihood. According to Saskia Sassen, globalization processes indeed take place and concentrate in the city spaces. She conceptually names these urban, cosmopolitan, capital, and financial mega-centers, global cities. In late twentieth century, these global cities have restructured themselves intensively, especially the massive upward mobilities of growing middle-class professionals. In most global cities, there were enormous demands for migrants to fulfil manual migrant jobs in the lower spectrums of the cities. These jobs were vacated by more established, educated, and wealthier professionals. Migrant workers from the countryside as well as from the Third World countries have moved in most cities around the world to take up jobs like nannies, grocers, laundry operators, gardeners, factory and construction workers, cooks, and sex workers.

My argument is that cities and human networks hold a crucial key in our attempts to understand the complicated problems of human trafficking and other modes of mobilities in Southeast Asia. The major destination of human flows from the Mekong hinterlands, especially labour forces and sex workers, is major urban centres or cities around the region such as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur,



and Singapore. As indicated in Srisuda's story, human agency always reworks and rearticulates borders and structures. Srisuda reminds us how and why human mobilities from the Mekong's hinterlands crossing international borders to Southeast Asia's global cities are increasingly feminized. Her story suggests that cities and towns have continued to dominate their rural hinterlands and should also provide some disturbing human inputs to rethink about overall development policies in the Mekong region in the past few decades.

### **Thai Migrants in Singapore as Transnational Actors**

It would be wrong to assume that individual agency prevails over the power and structure, which regulate, monitor, and control the flows of human movements across the border. Along the route from Bangkok to Hat Yai, KL, and Singapore, there are thousands of transnational border-crossers like Srisuda. Along the same route, structures like immigration units, checkpoints, and border fences represent the metaphors of how strict and how far nation-states have invested to regulate and police the border-crossing flows of people and goods. In my six years carrying out research on Thai migrants in Singapore, I have observed several forms of transnationalism on the grounds. Indeed, Srisuda and her friends as female border crossers engaging in odds job like under-covered sex work are vulnerable to exploitation and maltreatment by law enforcement authorities as well as transnational crime syndicates. The geopolitical structures and social networks of transnational mobilities are not solely handled by individual actors. State and market are the two greatest and most influential institutionalized forms of actors, who have imposed regulating power over individual actors, whether he or she is a dweller in a certain place or a traveller earning and living in motion. They constitute the dominant forces regulating and shaping the structures of transnational transactions. In order to dissect how state and market work in the transnational spaces covering and connecting

Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, I discuss the following categories of transnational actors: workmen, monks, housewives, sex workers, and tradeswomen.

Male workers are the early wave of transnational migrants out of the Thai countryside and out of traditional agricultural households. Village men either migrate to look for employment in the city or abroad. Workmen from Thailand coming down to work in Malaysia and Singapore are predominantly construction workers. Since the early 1980s, Singapore has become one of the most consistent labour markets in the region, where foreign workers from Bangladesh, China, India, and Malaysia are imported to contribute to the country's rapid economic growth. Workmen from the Thai countryside, e.g., Northern and Northeastern regions, have joined the international workforces in Singapore. The number had reached its peak between 50,000-60,000 in mid 1990s (Wong 2000). In mid 2000s, there are around 40,000 Thai workers in being employed in Singapore's construction and other industries (Pattana Kitiarsa 2008). The Thai workmen are known among Singaporean employers for their building skills and work ethics. The Ministry of Manpower has carefully controlled the number of foreign workers through its ceiling quotas and work permit system for years.

Thai Buddhist monks are significant transnational actors despite their number is very small. Monks' transnational mobility shows how Theravada Buddhism from Thailand has quietly expanded and intensively engaged in their missionization abroad. Most monks who travel and stay in overseas destinations for an extended period belong to a category of specially-trained missionary priests, called phra thammathut. Under the supervision by the Thai Sangha, Thai Buddhist monks travel abroad with some primary goals to provide religious service to the diasporic Thai community abroad. Together with the communities of the Thais living abroad, they set up temples or monastic centers, catering to religious needs for Buddhist Thais and Buddhist of other national

origins. There are more than 25 temples and meditation centers registered under the Thai Sangha Samacca in Singapore with more than 80 transnational monks stationing and travelling between Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. The flows of monastic personnel, Buddhist teachings, and objects of worship are usually from the Thai side, whereas followers and donations in cash and kind are from Singapore's side. The cooperation between Thai Buddhist monks and local Chinese Singaporean Buddhists are very essential in running Thai monasteries in Singapore. Temples have become meditation and Buddhist teaching centers as well as unique places for Thai diasporic festivals and cultures in Singapore. Local Chinese Buddhist Singaporeans view Thai monks for their mystic and magical power as much as perceive Thailand as the authentic origins of many Buddhist traditions, such as forest-dwelling mysticism as well as commercialized version of popular Buddhism. It is also ironic that Singapore authorities issue the same paper work to both monks and construction workers from Thailand. They are the holders of one-year renewable work permit.

On the women's side, Thailand has exported several groups of female care workers/labourers to Singapore, namely, housewife, domestic worker, and sex worker. With its female deficit, population growth rate below the replacement and the shortage of manpower, Singapore has to import foreign workers, both skilled and unskilled, male and female, to help sustain its economic growth. The numbers of Thai women, especially from working-class background, marrying and living in Singapore have been growing in the past decade. Working-class men in Singapore have difficulties finding their women as marital spouses because the female deficit in its demographic composition and the revolutionary trend among women aiming at hypergamous marriage. Imported brides from countries like Vietnam, China, Indonesia, and Thailand are common practices. Another smaller numbers of Thai women looking for migrant employment in Singapore are domestic workers. The Office of Thai Labour Affairs in Singapore

under the Ministry of Labour Affairs reported in 2005 that there were only a few hundred of domestic workers from Thailand being employed in Singapore. Many of them are workers for their American or European employers from their previous employments in Thailand. However, sex workers and tradeswomen from Thailand working in Singapore are well documented. They are either legally employed under the entertainer visa in the red-light district in Geylang or occasionally work under cover in night-life entertainment establishments, such as Orchard Tower and Golden Mile Complex. Some sex workers also work in the forest brothels near the foreign workers' hostels around the Island like in the case of Srisuda. On the weekends around the Golden Mile Complex (a.k.a Little Thailand) and the Kallang Riverside Park, groups of border-crossing tradeswomen from Hat Yai (mostly coming from North and Northeastern Thailand) travel to Singapore to sell some snacks to Thai construction workers on the pay-day weekends. These women are frequent travellers to Malaysia and Singapore. They are often involved in a number of income-earning activities, such as, money loans and occasional sex work, to the male workers (Pattana Kitiarsa 2008).

### **Implications of the 'Transnational Turn' through the Lives of Thai Migrants in Singapore**

What do transnational transactions mean for Thai workmen, monks, housewives, sex workers, and tradeswomen in Singapore? What do these people tell us about their attempts to stay afloat in the global economy as well as to keep feet in both worlds of home and host countries? How do the human stories of these people help us understand the "transnational turn" in the humanity and social science research? I propose that there are at least five points, which we can elucidate from the transnational experiences of people like Srisuda, workmen, monks, housewives, tradeswomen, and sex workers from Thailand in neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Singapore.

First, the migrant life and community of the transnational Thais in Singapore help thickening our scholarly awareness and imagination that producing knowledge or constructing certain aspects of Thai identity needs a much broader perspective. People we study nowadays are highly mobile subjects. Their social life usually involves some intensive travelling and border-crossing. More importantly, scholars in humanity and social science must redefine their ways of seeing and understanding. In his article on the transnational turn in the American historiography, Tyrrell (2009:463) reminds us that “the ‘causes’ of a particular event might be not purely local but instead operate simultaneously on different geographical and temporal scales, namely the local, regional, national, transnational, and global”. In other words, human experiences in our contemporary worlds are inherently translocal as much as transnational. Border-crossing in geopolitical, economic, and imaginary senses is the undeniable facts of life.

Second, transnationalism provides us an effective tool to free our scholarly approach from the confinements of localism and nationalism to incorporate something broader, more dynamic, and more interconnected beyond borders. The intensification of global interconnectivity is the foundation of the globalizing or transnationalizing world. It apparently forces us to revise our unit of analysis beyond the scope of nation-state or a local unit. In his classic work on the birth of new nation-states in Asia in post-Second World War II, Geertz (1973:258) argues that the peoples of the new states are simultaneously inspired by two powerful motives, namely “...the desire to be recognized as responsible agents who wishes, acts, hopes, and opinions “matter” and “the desire to build an efficient, dynamic modern state”. According to him, the peoples of the new states demand that “the identity be publicly acknowledged as ... “being somebody in the world”. They also “demand for progress, for rising standard of living, more effective political order, greater social justice, and beyond that of “playing a the larger arena of world politics”, of being

influence among the nations” (Ibid.). However, in the twenty first century, as more and more people weaving their socioeconomic life in the transnationalizing world, they demand more than what they did at the beginning of many new nation-states in Asia. They demand for economic livelihood beyond international borders as much as express strong assertion of global citizenship and sense of cosmopolitanism, which sometimes exist beyond the control of the nation-states. In short, people from all walks of life tend to widen their social worlds far beyond the nation as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 1991:7). They imagine themselves and situated themselves in the unbounded arenas that are global or transnational.

Third, thinking and working on the issues pertinent to transnationalism provide us some fresh conceptual tools. In order to cope with transnationalization, contemporary scholars have developed sets of key conceptual ideas, such as moving subjects, diasporic sentiments, migrant employments and institutions or networks, global cities, global care chains, or transnational religion. These concepts are thick and need more space to discuss each of them in details. However, my purpose here is to mention the newness and usefulness of them in helping us unveil the political economy of gender, race, religion, and other sociocultural aspects of transnational life. Take the case of Thai migrants in Singapore as examples. Thai workmen carry with them their masculine village culture from the Thai countryside, while they have to adjust themselves working with colleagues from Bangladesh, China, and India under the supervision of Chinese Singaporean employers. Thai housewives have to endure hardships in the patriarchal culture in the Chinese Singaporean households. Thai Buddhism in Singapore has to negotiate with the government’s policy on religious harmony, legal and immigration regulations and local practices. Concepts like migrant employment and networks, emotional care labour, and transnational religion are helpful to understand these transnational life situations. They represent



some revised conceptual paradigms to guide our research into human stories across humanity and social science disciplines.

Fourth, thinking and working on the issues pertinent to transnationalism contribute to policy-making process. The emergence of ASEAN in the global economy is one of many examples of how our knowledge of transnational processes could have some policy implications. Countries with labour surplus like Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines and Vietnam export their workers to other ASEAN countries and beyond. Thailand and Malaysia are both sending and receiving countries of foreign workers, whereas Singapore and Brunei are big receivers of imported workforces from neighbouring countries. These countries all have to face with the problems pertinent to immigration, employment, border regulation, and labour market. They have to regulate, police, and control transnational movements of people and commodities for their security, economic, and political reasons.

Finally, transnational approach in humanity and social science forces us to rethink our methodological tools and ethical commitments as researchers and scholars. We have to reflect on our conventional methods of inquiries. As we deal with forms and patterns of moving subjects across borders, towns, cities, and countries, it is possible to scholars to think about some carefully-crafted multi-sited research works. It is also possible to link subjects and places which hitherto are impossible to bring them together. Bestor (2001) convincingly explains the interconnectivity between Sushi industry, cuisine culture, Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, fishermen in North American and Europe, and many cities across many continents through his thorough study of the Atlantic Bluefin Tuna. He argues that the interconnectivity between commodity (Tuna), market, and global city is feasible through the globalization conditions and processes, which include "... the increasing velocity of capital (both economic and cultural) and the corresponding acceleration of transportation

and telecommunications” (Bestor. 2001, 76). Bestor’s research reminds us that engaged methodological and ethical commitments to the subject under investigation should one of the foundations of humanity and social science research in the transnationalization era.

## Conclusion

Based on my work on the Thai migrants in Singapore, I advocate the transnational approach in the humanity and social science research. I strongly see it as a potential way to explore the future of scholarly research across disciplines. Transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, but the intensification of global interconnectivity, the velocity and magnitude of human movements, and the encompassing impacts on the wide ranges of people from above and from below, earning and living across borders, makes transnationalism a genuine socio-political, economic, and cultural force of the twenty-first century. It is important that scholars in the fields of humanity and social science reflect on human experiences as “the product of global forces, such as shared experiences of urbanization, modernization, and industrialization” (Tyrrell. 2009, 462). Moreover, interconnections and flows of people, commodities, technologies, information, and ideas across transnational borders can be responsible for transformation of our social worlds.

By emphasizing the transnational approach, I imply that there is a small paradigmatic shift from focusing on nation and nationalism to transnationalism in terms of geographical and imaginary spaces and human transactions across international borders. I draw of the eventful cases of transnational Thais moving to Singapore in different forms and patterns to demonstrate how transnationalism could be taken as a critical concept to help us understand the challenges of our contemporary socio-political, economic, and cultural situations. Toward the end I suggest five ways that the transnational turn could contribute to the

future of humanity and social science research. We should revise our analytical understanding of transnational events by paying more attention to 1) moving subjects or human mobility; 2) looking for the interconnectedness between the local, the national, and the transnational; 3) reworking new conceptual tools; 4) drawing on some policy implications; and 5) rethinking our methodological and ethical commitments.

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