

From Migration Studies to Mobility Paradigm: An Evaluation of Frameworks Suitable for a Study of Highly-skilled Migration

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Abstract

Highly-skilled migrants, though small in number, have had an influence on sociocultural and economic situations in Thailand. However, there are few theoretical frameworks addressing the study of these migrants and it is not clear whether the concepts and theories applied to migration in general are applicable in the case of those who are highly skilled. This article reviews the frameworks that have been applied to the studies of highly-skilled migration, ranging from scholarship on migration studies to transnationalism to the emerging mobility paradigm. It shows that while none of these frameworks were conceived to understand movements of the highly skilled, they are not inherently un-applicable to research on migration of these groups either. The article further illustrates how these frameworks are products of interaction with empirical phenomena of migration temporally embedded in conditions at different periods which explain different aspects of migration. The article ends with a brief example of how the application of the mobility paradigm sheds new light on understanding the migration experiences of highly-skilled Japanese migrants in Si Racha, Thailand. It also examines what the framework drawing from the mobility paradigm might mean for future research on such migrants. I argue that the mobility paradigm's contribution to the study of highly-skilled migration is its shift of focus from migrants and their adjustment to the destination society to the formation of mobility which looks at the movement of migrants, meanings, power and infrastructure. In this way, it allows us to see the virtual immobility of the highly skilled to the point that little incorporation into Thai culture is required.

Keywords: highly-skilled migration, transnationalism, mobility paradigm

Introduction

The current world is characterized by mobility, and thus, it is not surprising that a large number of studies examine migration. Most of these studies, however, focus on the migration of low-skilled laborers, while ignoring highly-skilled migration. Studies of highly-skilled migrants often focus on the “brain drain,” seeing the migration direction as the movement from developing to developed countries which offer a higher income for the same job or profession. Moreover, often when highly-skilled migrants are the subject of research, they are referred to as ‘expats,’ a word that does not connote the economic aspects or working life of these migrants, as if they were merely ‘living abroad.’ In this regard, the study of highly-skilled migrants in Thailand has not been given attention. As for the development of frameworks and theories, although highly-skilled migration is a form of migration, there is still the question of whether the framework explaining migration as a way for better opportunities can be applied to highly-skilled migrants. Therefore, in this article, I review overall migration literature to see whether the literature from different periods can be used to study highly-skilled migrants. In addition, I will review the proposal of John Urry on the new mobilities paradigm, which criticizes the compartmentalization of mobility studies and their limits, such as short travel, logistics, the movement of meaning, the capability of mobility, the actual mobility, the imagination of mobility and things that happen during mobility. Comparing the mobility framework and migration studies, I aim to distinguish between the two frameworks by analyzing the migration of Japanese highly-skilled migrants in Si Racha district, Chonburi province using the mobility paradigm.

The article begins by exploring changes in the frameworks of migration studies before deciding whether to use these frameworks on highly-skilled migrants because each migration framework derives from different relationships with data from different periods based on different natural, historical, and social conditions. One such period viewed migration as a household strategy to cope with local or domestic economic risks. The migration of highly-skilled migrants was not a

popular subject of interest. Another period examined monetary remittances or social remittances (Levitt, 2001), but the subject of research still not include highly-skilled migrants. However, that being said, it does not mean that these frameworks cannot be applied with highly-skilled migrants. Therefore, in this article, I will use these frameworks in discussion with highly-skilled migrant studies and evaluate whether the framework of each period is beneficial to understanding these migrants, what they focus on, and what they overlook. Then, I will review expat literature, which overlaps with highly-skilled migrant studies but is often overlooked by migration and labor academics because it frequently points to issues of identity and lifestyle of “overseas residents.” I propose that the mobility paradigm is a significant means of overcoming the compartmentalization of transnational life and that it depicts how highly-skilled migrants give rise to specific lifestyles and identities. Overall, this article emphasizes reviewing literature by stressing its specific historical contexts to shed light on the politics of knowledge of mobility studies. In addition to pointing out the limitations of each framework, I also intend to propose the one most appropriate to modern highly-skilled migrants.

This article concludes with tangible application of the mobility paradigm in the analysis of Japanese highly-skilled migrants in Si Racha district, Chonburi province. The main issue I propose is that the mobility paradigm is the result of a conversation between the framework and social, material, and technological phenomena rather than the development of theoretical discussion alone. Therefore, empirical study is crucial to drive the framework used for this research.

Migration Theories and Highly-skilled Migrants

Overall, theories attempt to explain migration but there is little theoretical generalization, only patterns from the phenomenon (or often called, low-stance theory, meaning that the theory is close to empirical phenomena). Theories tend to catch the overview of the actual migration pattern in each period only. Even though explanations like these have advantages, they cause migration theories to change rather often and

miss the continuation of the “mechanism” that blends migration formats from different periods together. The result is a particular explanation for each group. To clarify, when we identify the reasons for migration of unskilled laborers as poverty, a strategy to disseminate risk, or global structural inequality, we often explain them as economic coping mechanisms that enable underprivileged groups to travel elsewhere. Yet, it is uncertain whether these reasons explain the flow of people from different classes. Hence, I will review migration theories briefly and discuss their potential to explain highly-skilled migrants’ mobility as well as mentioning the concreteness of their application.

Positioning Theories of Migration in Eras of Migration

International migration studies have become an established field in the social sciences with leading journals for the subject. However, this field is often criticized for the lack of theories that lend a deeper understanding (Massey et al.1993: 432; Faist, 2000). In understanding theories of migration, academics often allude to a review article by Douglas Massey, who proposes categorizing international migration studies into two groups. The first group explains reasons for migration, while the second consists of theories that explain the continuation of migration.

The first group that aims to explain reasons for migration consists of two main developments. One development is the conceptualization of migration as a response to economic conditions, such as being pushed to migrate due to poverty or being drawn to the destination country by its superior labor market and better compensation. The theory, in fact, has a dynamic. For example, early theories often explain push and pull forces on an individual basis as a unit of analysis based on neoclassical economics. Next, the unit of analysis moves on to the household basis by explaining that migration is more than a personal matter, as it is a family matter. It involves a family’s decision not to subject the entire family to the volatility of the local economy by sending one member to work abroad. Despite evidence from research looking at a family member as a single economic unit reflects better truth, it is still a compartmentalization. It does not

prioritize the inequality of the global economy, and thereby contributes to the theoretical development of the second phase, that is, migration as a result of the inequality of the global economy. This phase looks at the issue at a more relational level, such as the dual market theory and the world system theory. Both theories focus on the big picture and are not concerned with the process of individual decisions. The dual market tries to connect migration with the demands of the new industrial economy, while the world system theory sees migration as an inevitable consequence of economic globalization which allows large markets to permeate the boundary of nation states.

These theories, while explaining only economic aspects, expand from the individual to the global level – the decisions of individuals, households, nations, internationality, and global, respectively. These theories are not based on highly-skilled migrants and can be of little use to explain them, although it can be roughly deduced that the migration of highly-skilled migrants would be the opposite or it can explain their non-migration. Therefore, early ideas of migration studies only stated that highly-skilled workers did not migrate probably because there were no driving factors and/or that logistics and communication technologies were not advanced enough. Thus these theories often do not address the migrations by this group.

The theory in the second group explains migration on a structural level and focuses almost exclusively on the continuation of migration instead of explaining the reasons. This group consists of the network, institutional, and the cumulative causation theories, according to which it is impossible to understand migration by looking at a small unit – whether an individual or a household. Migration must be understood as a consequence of the global economy, and unequal power relations are what cause poverty in some places, not inherent characteristics of the place itself. According to this concept, as long as there is inequality in the economy, skilled migrants will flow from lower-paying to higher-paying areas. This is followed by two consequences. The flow of laborers will eventually create a balance in wages because when an overflowing migration of laborers occurs, the wages in that country have to increase according to the law of supply

and demand, while the wages of the destination country decrease. When this process runs for a while, the wages between two areas will become similar and thus, the flow of laborers will stop.

Another view argues that the flow of laborers will only create a wider discrepancy between the origin and destination countries because those who migrate to high-wage countries are often economically productive. Therefore, they would enable the already-wealthy country to become wealthier while the origin country that loses them will become poorer.

Theories explaining the origin of migration have many different facets, including an individual's decision, the labor situation, the capital market in the destination country, and the single market global economy that makes people unable to make a living or lose their jobs, all of which contribute to labor migrants. Once people migrate, the conditions that allow them to stay in the destination countries vary. Massey referred to these conditions overall as 'cumulative causation,' which means the circumstances where former migrants build conditions for later migrants to migrate and on similar routes because of the expansion of migrant networks, institutionalization of support and infrastructure, and changes in the meaning of work in the destination society. Formerly, migrants often filled the gap in the low-skilled labor market or in jobs not wanted by locals. When there are more migrants, however, they often become ethnically-focused business owners of establishments such as Asian restaurants, Thai massage places, Korean groceries or Chinese take-home food services, etc. Networks of same nationality migrants allow the later generations to migrate more easily as they have an economic basis built by the first generation. Research on these conditions has led to numerous concrete studies, such as one using land allocation. That is, normally the income earned through migration is used to buy a piece of land back at home, but the purposes of these purchases are often to demonstrate one's economic status or to use as a retirement residence. This condition becomes the cumulative causation for migration, as an unused plot of land becomes a compelling reason to migrate out later (Massey et al., 1993: 452).

Culturally, migration stimulates values, tastes, lifestyles, and aspirations. Thus, migrants after returning home tend to migrate again. In some areas, migration has become a community value, similar to a rite of passage which brands people who did not try to migrate as lazy, not having an entrepreneurial mind, and somehow undesirable (Reichert, 1982). This is another aspect of migration.

As time passes, migration increases human capital and stimulates economic growth in the destination society, while the origin country which lacks high-quality labor has to face economic contraction. This in repeat stimulates migration as a necessity because the origin country no longer has enough work.

On the subject of social stigmatization, in the destination country, when migrants accumulatively work in a certain type of a job, that job becomes known as “a job for a migrant,” which makes locals unwilling to take such a job. An example is construction labor in Thailand nowadays. This stigmatization eventually becomes a structural condition that increases the volume of migration.

In conclusion, the cumulative causation theory explains migration as a self-fulfilling process with many elements. Moreover, like previous theories, it does not derive information directly from highly-skilled labor. There is also no evidence that the researchers who use this theory focus on highly-skilled migrants. Yet, this does not mean that it cannot be used to understand them. I think this concept may help to explain the closed circle of highly-skilled migrants who may not be obvious because they may be scattered across the globe. Highly-skilled migrants often choose to work for people with whom they have a personal relationship because when the work is more specific, the organization to connect each part of the work is crucial. Choosing someone who is already in the network is often the first resource, and it further prevents workers outside the circle from joining. However, this process does not have fixed physical characteristics as proposed in the cumulative causation theory, but runs in a closed circle of highly-skilled professionals working in multinational corporation networks that cut across physical space.

Later Development of Migration Theories

There are two theoretical trends in academia that are currently used with respect to migration: structuration and transnationalism. The former was born out of the criticism that migration studies attempts to explain the concreteness of migration without abstracting its empirical data; hence, it lacks understanding deeper than just a summary of information. As a result, many studies specifically try to understand migrants through the theory of structuration to explain the relationship between humans and structure (meta-theoretical framework); examples are O' Reilly (2012), Morawska (1999), and Stones, et al. (2019).

Transnationalism theory is a framework resulting from changes in the quality of migration due to transformations in telecommunications technology that have made it ubiquitous, fast, and cheap. This development makes the perception of separating the origin and destination countries at odds with the facts. The transnationalism theory, therefore, sees that communities in the origin and destination are physically apart, but connected through society, economy, and culture. The migration academics became interested in the transnationalism theory in the migration context in the decades before and after 2000 (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998, Rex 1995, Mahler, 1998). This interest is a result of the increase in migration at the international level which could not be separated from the technology of globalization. Some critics argue that transnationalism is not a long-lasting phenomenon and will slowly disappear after migrants settle down in the destination country and that transnational ties will not be significant for later generations (Levitt, DeWind, and Vertovec, 2003; Morawska, 2003). Others contend that 'transnationalism' is a new word that eventually points back to the old phenomenon. However, these criticism are based not on debates but on empirical research. Yet, it is obvious that the nature of transnational relationships in the 2000s differs from the migrants in the early generations who often had to spend around two months just to get a single letter between origin and destination countries. This difference leads to the argument of Remennick (2007), that the relationship of

migrants in the first wave was limited to cultural and emotional longing for the past while the later waves are more concerned with connection and mobility.

Moreover, transnationalism is a multifaceted concept (Charoensri, 2011; Levitt, 2001: 237) mentions the approach to this concept through three main ideas. The first is based on research in North America regarding the transnational connection of migrants and the dissolution of nation-state boundaries that divide their social relationships but at the same time does not completely dissolve the boundaries of the nation states. The second idea comes from European academics examining transnationalism beyond the boundaries of the nation state who are interested in supra-statal organizations such as the EU or religious alliances (particularly Islamic). The last idea comes from cultural studies focusing on the construction of identity from diasporas. It often emphasizes identity that is diverse, discordant, and dependent on the construction of identity that responds to the transnational community (Appadurai, 1996; Lowe, 2005; Gilroy, 1993).

However, despite internal differences, transnationalism as a framework is important. It examines transnational relationships at many levels from the supra-statal to the individual and views nation-states as influential in managing these relationships (Levitt et al., 2003: 567-571). In the case of highly-skilled migrants, we may see the influence of the Thai government in helping to facilitate the migration of management executives from multinational corporations, and with investments and indirect marketing. In this research, we can also see its influence in trying to develop the eastern region into an industrial area through the signing of contracts with partners that transformed it into an important production base for Japanese industries. The plan to develop the eastern region of Thailand into an industrial area took place in 1982 when the 5th National Economic and Development Plan (1982-1986) was issued. Since then the Japanese highly-skilled have gathered in the region. Currently, there are approximately 10,000 Japanese living in Si Racha and it is expected that when construction of the new elderly care facility is completed, there will be 20,000 more.

Next, the impact transnationalism has on migrants might not override the influence of the nation state. To clarify, it is possible that participation in transnational relationships may be a reaction to being barred from the destination country, or that different groups of migrants may have unequal choices and resources to participate in transnational relationships. For example, in my study of Thai women in England who migrated through marriage, I found that for lower-class women, migration enables their nationality status to overshadow their class, but the inability to have a career outside of manual or care-taking work isolates them from society. Consequently, they maintain close relationships with their families back home. Meanwhile, women who can attain professional careers view transnational relationships as a choice travel back home as a retreat rather than a means of strengthening relationships. This also explains why it is important for women from the lower class to maintain their transnational status through lavish spending when visiting home (Charoensri, 2011).

In the end, some aspects of transnational social life are often overlooked, especially religion and gender, although it is frequently mentioned that gender is prominent in arranging the social order of transnational relationships, which affect men and women differently. For example, Levitt (2001) explained the difference between Dominican men and women who migrate from Miraflores to Jamaica Plain in Boston. Women found that their migration elevates their social status so they are more destination oriented, while men found that migration lowers their status so they focus more on maintaining relationships with their origin country.

In some cases, transnational relationships lead to a change in relationships between the sexes. For example, the study of Boonmathaya (2005) mentions that transnational relationships lead to a new understanding of the female body and changes in perception of men from the same nationality. Transnational relationships have thus contributed to Thai women's demands for a more equal relationship between the sexes.

Apart from these issues, transnational relationships are more diverse in scope of connection: some migrants' transnational connections are so specific that they are more aptly termed translocal rather than transnational (Sinatti, 2008). There is also a distinction between objective and subjective aspects of transnational relationships seen as a separation between 'ways of belonging' and 'ways of being.' The former is mostly confined to the realm of group identity of certain migrants while the latter is "the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than the identities associated with their action" (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2007: 189). The concreteness of this difference may be illustrated through the case of migrants who daydream about their hometown and do not become in any transnational relationships. Furthermore, a study by Robins and Aksoy even suggests that participation with the country of origin through media might contribute to the shattering of nostalgic images of "home" (Robins and Aksoy, 2005).

I propose that these categorizations are important in understanding highly-skilled migrants even though case studies using the transnationalism concept do not focus on them particularly. The concept is an enlargement of the first group's theory, nevertheless, as it pays attention to identity, connection points, and multi-level relationships. Though the nation state is still allocated an important role within the transnational framework, it is less so when compared to the early theories of migration. The reasons for this are not confined to theoretical development, but are attributed to a theoretical dialogue with existing research including the time in which migration occurs, the growth of influential supra-statal organizations, and the existence of relatively cheap and fast air travel. These factors clearly contribute to the movement of highly-skilled migration, yet this group has not been the subject of empirical research under the umbrella of transnationalism. However, transnationalism provides significant categorizing concepts that are applicable to the case of the highly skilled. In addition to 'ways of belonging' and 'ways of being,' it focuses on identity, which results from transnational connections both in terms of objectivity and

subjectivity. It also focuses on an attempt to respond to this issue by emphasizing the empirical, context-dependent nature of migration. This framework also explains why we see more free movement of highly-skilled migrants in some areas than in others.

Research on Expats

Another significant type of scholarship is related to highly skilled migrants known as ‘expats.’ The word’s literal meaning derives from a Latin word which means a group of people who live outside their home country. However, research using this word refers predominantly to white-skinned migrants from the west (Fechter, 2016) and connotes them as privileged migrants and mobile professionals. These studies do not focus on the experience of these migrants as much as the issue of their identity being shaped by being white. They often indicate that “white Western” is an identity that cuts across nationality or races of the expats, a process referred to as ‘racialization’ (Fechter, 2016; Leonard, 2008). The imagination connected with being white allows these expats to have privilege in the destination country without having their right to migration questioned. Fechter makes an interesting note that the arrangement of social position of white migrants is closely connected with the imagination of postcolonialism (Fechter and Walsh, 2010).

In later research, mobile professions are not limited to high-level positions as in the past, but there are middle-level positions that hire temporary Western migrants. Hence, the status of “being white” becomes negotiable rather than being automatically assigned to high status of the destination country (Farrer, 2010). Moreover, the specific area and context of the destination country also shape specific arrangements of expats such as the British in Hong Kong (Leonard, 2008). With the historical backdrop of British colonialism, the tendency for British migrants to move there is high. In another case, studied by Karen O’Reilly, with an existing British community and facilities, it is easier to retain the lifestyle of the origin country (O’Reilly, 2000).

Nevertheless, this research emphasizes the diversity and unevenness of these high-level Western migrants. This diversity comes from different factors, such as motivation in mobility, level of skill, and length of time as an expatriate, such as moving for settling down or taking a temporary job. These various combinations may result in Western migrants having different emplacements and statuses in the destination country (Farrer, 2010).

In summary, research using the word, ‘expats,’ often focuses on complicated identity issues which are the result of the postcolonial imagination and whiteness. In the meantime, there has not been much research on Asians who migrate for work and most importantly, there was little interest in the role that infrastructure plays in migration of the highly-skilled before the mobility paradigm was proposed.

The Mobility Paradigm

The mobility paradigm proposes the necessity of a shift in social sciences which presumed that most studies should be based on forms of settlement. Consequently, the frameworks for the analyses of human societies are by and large based on geographical areas, so that there are divisions of subfields such as urban sociology and rural sociology. Also previous social science research often perceived mobility and migration as abnormalities that require explanation, while assuming the normality of staying put. Moreover, a study often separates the mobility of people from the mobility of objects, vehicles, transportation and connecting technology such as the internet and mobile phones, and it usually analyzes actual mobility separate from potential mobility. This separation often creates “blind spots” – areas without a study, such as short-time travel (or commuting) that is often deemed ‘wasted time’ which has no social intrinsic value and is thought of as ‘dead time,’ despite the fact that each day people spend a lot of time traveling. In this case, migration studies are interested in movement, mostly in the form of re-settlement, while transportation studies are interested in shortening traveling time without giving consideration to people and

social life. Dwelling-in-motion, such as activities people do between traveling, becomes a no man's land, although in big cities nowadays we might spend four hours per day traveling. Many people on trains or subways use this time to communicate with family, or prepare a presentation for clients. This gap is astonishing considering the modern state where people spend an incredible amount of time traveling.

The size and ubiquity of modern mobility and the limitations of academic discipline induced Mimi Sheller and John Urry (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007) to propose the mobility paradigm, which considers mobility to be a normal condition and does not single out migration from other types of mobility, such as regular short distance travel or the movement of things as well as people. This paradigm includes many fields of study to explain many aspects of mobility such as migration studies, sociology, mass communication studies, technology studies and transportation studies. This shows important aspects of highly-skilled migrant studies by pointing out the three limitations of previous migration scholarship described below.

1. Ignoring the mobility of communication technology, infrastructure and objects even though these mobilities are based on social, economic and political orders, and therefore significantly shape migratory experiences. For example, the case of Japanese highly-skilled migrants in Si Racha shows that conditions of their migration are closely linked to long-lasting Thai-Japanese economic connections, while the continuity of that migration is sustained by the infrastructure that makes possible a well-rounded Japanese lifestyle, in Si Racha, i.e. diet, residence (the availability of Japanese-style houses and hotels), workplace (factory and transnational company network), and recreation (golf courses and Japanese-style snack bars).

2. Minimization of the impacts of mobility on important aspects of life such as family, work, politics, and education. Previous studies framed by migration theories primarily evaluated how migrants' lives in a destination country are shaped by the sociocultural environment there, while the mobility paradigm proposes that we should look at how the mobility of things, people, and infrastructure might come together

to institutionally inform migratory experiences. Previous structural analyses often conceptualized this in terms of Japanese cultural traits that tend to resist change. The mobility paradigm, by contrast, explains that change is not necessary for the Japanese highly-skilled, because of the availability of objects and infrastructure resulting from mobility.

3. Social studies have a tendency to emphasize human relationships and reduce the importance of physical infrastructure and objects in terms of how they impact arrangements and coordination in human society, the economy, and politics. In this study, it can be seen that the existence of company networks, airlines, marine transportation, easy and quick mobility of materials from production materials to food, TV satellites, mobile phones, the internet, school networks, language schools, and mobility of monetary capital all contribute to patterns of social interaction.

Besides being important for the construction and institutionalization of social relations, networks of things, people, and infrastructures are also reciprocal and accumulative. Networks of infrastructure enhance the possibility of human relationships, and the relationships enhance the possibility of infrastructure. In the case of Japanese highly-skilled migrants in Thailand, their increase in number allows them to have sustaining infrastructure. For example, in the past there were only service apartments for Japanese, but now there is a joint venture between Sahapat Co., Ltd. and Tokyo Company to build a Japanese-style housing estate with a kindergarten, primary schools and secondary schools until grade 9 located within walking distance. This is to ensure that when children reach grade 9, they can return to Japan and continue their studies smoothly while being separated from their family. Therefore, with transnational families, the Japanese tradition of sending children to university in Japan can be sustained. Moreover, close to the housing estate are language schools and places for extracurricular activities such as floristry, handicrafts, yoga, Pilates, a Japanese shopping mall, restaurants, moving companies – all to ensure that their lifestyle can be maintained as if they were still in Japan (Charoensri, 2018).

The existence of such conveniences encourages families to follow their husbands and fathers who were sent to work here by transnational companies. Preliminary field research also suggests that the families relocated here are highly satisfied with the way of life in Thailand, and in many cases, when the husband is sent back to the home country or to work elsewhere, such as India (because some of the companies are looking for a cheaper production base since the cost of production in Thailand has increased), the family chooses to stay behind instead of following him.

From Migration Theories to the Mobility Paradigm and the Study of Highly-skilled Migrants in Thailand

From reviewing the frameworks that can be used to study highly-skilled migrants, the theories that emerge can be divided into the following three groups: 1) migration theories, 2) transnationalism, and 3) the mobility paradigm. While the groups did not inherently develop in response to the study of highly-skilled migrants, they have the potential to be used for studying them. Each one has its own strength to explain each part of the migration. The first theoretical group focuses on the causation for migration and the reason why the destination must be a certain area and also analyzes the consequences of migration on the origin and destination countries. The second theoretical framework focuses on the cross-border continuation of relationships in many aspects, including economy, politics and culture, and how that continuation affects migrants' lives and their transnational community. The theories in this group start to step away from understanding within the framework of the origin and destination states but point out that migration enables new forms of community with social relations that span beyond the boundary of the states. The final group, the mobility paradigm, not only reduces the origin and destination states to just one dimension in migratory analysis. It also rejects the idea that the transnational social field that comes about from traveling, connecting, and exchanging influence between migrants and their relationship

whether transnational or not is not an entire explanation of the migratory experience. It argues, instead, that the focus also has to be on infrastructure, commuting, experiences, and the difficulty or ease of movement that links back to meaning, power and politics in mobility.

Therefore, these three groups of theories emphasize different parts of the migration process rather than conflict with each other. I propose that they come from the nature of migration that has changed in each era rather than coming from cumulative research data that advances theories. The research on Japanese migrants in Si Racha that Natcharee Suwannapat and I conducted uses the mobility paradigm to explain the experience of migrants in Thailand and propose that this experience can be conceptualized as one of ‘virtual immobility,’ which results from the dialogue between research data and the mobility paradigm. In this study, Natcharee and I use a new definition of highly-skilled migrants which sees them as highly-mobile workers with highly-mobile skills. This definition comes about from the literature review on highly-skilled migrants in contemporary migration. We found that there are four important groups of the highly skilled: 1) professionals; 2) politicians, diplomats, and businessmen; 3) top executives in multinational corporations; and 4) the creative class, such as artists and curators. The nature of work of the first groups requires high-level mobility, while the last one is relatively free to choose where to work and live (Yeoh and Lam, 2016). These migrants’ social relationships span across borders, yet they are closed circuit, difficult for outsiders to join. In terms of physical aspects, there is a fluidity of mobility between nodes of each circuit. For example, highly-skilled migrants who move through the network of Japanese corporations can travel from Si Racha to India or back to Japan more easily than they can travel outside the eastern region of Thailand because their companies provide insurance for them that covers only certain areas. In political aspects, these migrants are not often seen as such because of their superior status which makes them accepted, welcome, and perceived as threat-free (in contrast to alien labor), and thus they are not a subject for study¹. They are

¹ For further details in the political aspects of mobility see Cresswell (2010).

deemed expats instead of labor migrants as if they were not working. Finally, the issue of infrastructure which has largely been overlooked in the past has recently received considerable interest because of the influence of the mobility paradigm and technological advancement that significantly impacts social life. Our research results from our reflection on how infrastructure that enables a lifestyle similar to that in Japan – schools their children go to, housing estates and service apartments they reside in, and supermarkets where they shop – all of which make their migratory experience seem as if they have not moved anywhere (virtual immobility). This explanation differs from conventional migration studies, which, if used to analyze these Japanese migrants, will often explain that their lack of cultural adjustment is due to their cultural superiority.

To conclude, this research proposes that to understand the experience of highly-skilled migrants in Thailand is to see them as a result of all the aforementioned aspects of social life, so they are context-dependent and require empirical study. At the same time, these data have to be analyzed in relation to theoretical debates that have been in constant dialogue with the unfolding phenomena. To define these migrants as highly-mobile professionals with mobile skills is therefore not a definition separate from the context, but the proposal of a definition that aligns with their social life in the current period.

Conclusion

Highly-skilled migrants are an important migrant group in today's world and by ignoring them as a subject of study much important understanding of the nature of mobility in the contemporary period will be missed. Currently in Thailand, highly-skilled migrants are diverse, and although Japanese are the officially largest such group in the country, there are many others. There are Chinese entrepreneurs who mobilize Chinese diasporic networks to run restaurants, tourism companies and agricultural businesses; a foreign creative class that is gentrifying certain areas of Bangkok; and Filipinos and Westerners who come to work as language

teachers and live partially as residential tourists (Benson and O' Reilly, 2009). In certain cases, the highly-skilled migrants' work life is unseen because of their path of migration and marriage. When viewed as someone who has migrated through marriage, their working life is often omitted from studies. This leads to another crucial problem of migration studies – compartmentalization of life aspects. Similarly, the impact of foreign artists who gentrify the city, when investigated through the lens of migration studies, is not often analyzed in interaction with that of urban studies. I would like to propose that the mobility paradigm is a major contribution to answering the problem of compartmentalization of studies because it addresses the construction of mobility experience which includes all aspects of social life, and interaction with technology and infrastructure.

In addition, the mobility paradigm allows us to see a group of people overlooked by former migration studies who are too highly mobile to be called immigrants. They may even stay in Thailand for too short a period of time to be called residents. This form of migration can be called hypermobility for people who have mobility as a part of the job (Vertovec, 2007) and it leads to further investigation of the ways in which this hypermobility connects to changes in infrastructure, cultural values, social networks, politics and power relations. I propose that measuring the level of mobility would shed light on our understanding of how global citizens live their lives today, and that this data should be collected along with information about their origin and destination countries.

The final important contribution of the mobility paradigm is to promote conversations among separate academic fields, such as mobility, sociology of work, and urban studies. For example, how do mobility (of finance, ideas, people, things), on the one hand, and land use and the changing urban landscape, on the other, influence each other. In addition to the Japanese highly-skilled migrants that have changed the city of Si Racha and its residents' imagination, the mobility of artists, curators, and creative people has started to impact old-town Bangkok. If we focus on the highly skilled, we may see that their coming

is occurring together with the expulsion of lower-income dwellers. This change is evident in some of the older areas of Bangkok like Chinatown where the area's charm has attracted creative people who came to reside there, stay, and change the area. I believe that the time has come to allow all three areas of studies, once divided, to come together.

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