

Editorial

Transnational Flows of Contemporary Asia: Trends and Futures

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Asia is a major hub of impressive flows in many ways. Half of the twelve biggest rivers in the world flow through this region and provide resources and infrastructures that affect more than 50 percent of the world's population. As the home to some of the largest and fastest growing economies in the world, this region witnesses and houses not only massive flows of economies and trading activities but also vivid flows of information, industries, and innovation. Moreover, Asia is either the home or the transit center for colossal streams of migration (both in terms of internal and transnational migration) and tourism. According to the International Organization for Migration, around 40 percent of the world's international migrants originate from Asia and it is also the region with the fastest growing numbers of emigrants and immigrants (Mcauliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). As a result, global cross-border flows have been shifting toward this region in several dimensions including trade, capital, people, knowledge, transport, culture, resources, and the environment (Tonby et al. 2019), and what is happening in Asia and the future of this area cannot be comprehended without contemplating these flows. Globalization and the expansion of international/internal migration have opened new "spaces of flows" (Castles and Miller 2003) where subjects, objects, commodities, capital, discourses, and ideas move and circulate. Taking this context into consideration, this special issue attempts to trace, investigate, and make sense of the transnational flows that have been happening within and beyond Asia. Subsequently, it seeks to provide a closer look into the different transnational flows that are shaping Asia's dynamic characteristics, realities, and possible future.

Using transnational flows as a conceptual window, this special issue tackles not only fluid movements but also immobilities, fractures, stagnations, and/or disruptions that co-exist or emerge as the results of transnational flows in Asia. Beyond intra-Asian mobilities, this issue also considers transnational flows that connect Asia to other parts of the world to comprehend the articulated asymmetrical power relations between different actors and institutions around the globe. Asia in this sense is subsequently not limited to geographical locations but rather goes beyond national/regional/geographical frameworks. Before introducing the contributions that investigate the various flows of people, knowledge, goods, practices, and power

that transgress Asian national, cultural, and political borders, this editorial will provide a deeper conceptualization of the notion of transnational flows. Specifically, the concept of flows will be discussed in terms of its usage within existing literature and how it is apprehended within the scope of this special issue.

Studying Movements and Mobilities through Transnational Flows

In our modern world where interconnectedness has become an integral norm, it is difficult to examine any given phenomenon, process, or subject without positioning it in connection to other social actors, tangible and intangible objects, and phenomena. Such a characteristic of globalized society has been described via several concepts. Studies on globalization have engaged with notions of scapes, hyperconnection, or simultaneity to investigate how different areas, places, and individuals around the globe are interlinked (Appadurai 1990; Callon 1998; Latour 1993). For instance, Appadurai's theorization of scapes (1990) including ethno, techno, financial, media, and ideological scapes, was an attempt to grasp how global cultural flows penetrate and produce representations of the social world. Among the most widely used concepts to describe the interconnectedness of global life, the notion of flows has been extensively engaged with by scholars in different fields. Castells (1999) considered the globalized modern society to be constructed around flows, with flows of capital, images, sounds, and symbols forming particular spaces and patterns that dominate and shape social organizations, institutions, behaviors, and identities. Flows are not just one element of social organization but "the expression of processes dominating our economic, political, and symbolic life" (Castells 1999). Castells (1999, 295) also pointed to the fluidity of flows by suggesting the concept of "space of flows," which is the material arrangements that allow the "simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity." Similarly, Ritzer (2010, 2) engaged with the concept of flows to define globalization as a "set of processes involving increasing liquidity and the growing multidirectional flows of people, objects, places, and information as well as the structures they encounter and create that are barriers to or expedite those flows." Going beyond defining the phenomenon of globalization, scholars have also paid attention to how flows penetrate structures and how structures control and block different types of flow. Observing such an occurrence, Rey and Ritzer (2010) identified four types of flows that characterize globalization including interconnected flows, multidirectional flows, conflicting flows, and reverse flows. The notion of flows thus provides a better heuristic for the pervasive scaling and re-scaling dynamics intrinsic to the reality of a globalized world (Sassen 2007) such as the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, location, dislocation, and re-location which do not only occur among and through national borders but also, and especially, on the local levels of daily experiences.

The notion of flows has also been of particular importance in other research fields. Cardao-Pito (2022), for example, suggested comprehending socio-economic activities and relations based on the theory of intangible flows, which takes into consideration economic flows that are not visible on top of others that can be easily observed and traced. The concept of flows has also gained important status in mobility and migration studies. Such popularity is not surprising as these fields typically deal with “large-scale movements of people, objects, capital and information across the world [...], together with the local processes of daily transportation of travel and material things within everyday life” (Büscher et al. 2011). Since the beginning of the 1990s, scholarship indicating the plurality of activities that take place beyond rigid national borders (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Portes et al. 1999; Vertovec 2009) has proliferated. These studies suggested taking “transnationalism” as the core framework to comprehend the heterogeneous set of social practices and identities that are taken up by actors in the increasingly interconnected, hypermobile global arena. For example, it is impossible to fully capture the experience of contemporary migration without contemplating migrants’ simultaneous connections to different networks of people, information, and cultural products that span across geographical, cultural, and political borders. The perspective of transnationalism also hints at going beyond the “methodological nationalism” (Beck 2009; Faist 2012; Roulleau-Berger 2017; Weiß and Nohl 2012) that considers the nation-state as the only analytical unit and container for social processes. The notion of flows therefore assists the portrait of trans-border connections, movements, and activities that mobile populations and objects carry out within and across a multiplicity of places, spaces, locations, and scales. In other words, in a social landscape where mobility has become a constant rather than a variable (Schultermandl and Toplu 2010), the notion of flows helps better grasp how subjects, objects, capital, ideas, intimacies, affections, and emotions are on the move through and beyond a plurality of social, economic and moral spaces.

Because flows can glide through borders and boundaries, the notion of flows can suggest an overconcentration on fluid movements that transgress borderlines. Migration studies, for example, used to have a “mobility bias” (Schewel 2020) that focused predominantly on how people become mobile or how mobility is made possible. This bias directs attention to the drivers of mobility and risks, overlooking the countervailing forces that restrict or resist them, although these hindering forces are as important as those that allow mobilities. As a result, scholars have been advocating for the investigation of the relationship between mobility and immobility, between movement and stasis, as these are concepts that dialectically and complementarily exist (Baas and Yeoh 2019; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) to make better sense of the opportunities, constraints, obstacles, and possibilities emerging from transnational migration. Moreover, the study of flows requires giving thought to the direction, volume/density, and characteristics of flows over time. Flows of labor migrants, for example, tend to be seen as following the global-South-

to-global-North direction, which might not be correct when temporal discrepancies are considered. Recognizing the need for transnational and nuanced takes on flows that consider movement, simultaneity, and im/mobility, this special issue proposes engaging with the notion of transnational flows to look at not only cross-border migration but also other phenomena of movement and (im)mobility in contemporary Asia. The transnational flows in this issue cover movements, mobilities, and streams that not only cross and transgress but also challenge and contest borders. These flows include but are not limited to tangible mobilities and circulations of humans, commodities, capital, objects, and practices but also intangible movements of ideas, information, norms, and power. As a result, transnational flows feature the endless links amongst different actors, spaces, and practices positioned in and between dissimilar “transnational social fields” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) that straddle national borders.

In addition, since transnational flows interact with variegated actors and infrastructures along their flowing trajectories, they are often confronted with a variety of barriers and borders not only in terms of physical borderlines between nation states or geographical areas but also numerous virtual, social, economic, and cultural boundaries. As a result, it is necessary to acknowledge and take into consideration the effects of spatial fixities (Smith 1999) and also factors and structures that obstruct certain types of transnational flow while allowing or facilitating others. The crises that came out of the Covid-19 global pandemic can be good examples of such situations in which transnational flows of humans temporarily ceased or were interrupted between many locations and regions while the flows of certain commodities and goods (especially medical supplies such as masks and vaccines) intensified. Xiang et al. (2022) applied the concept of “shock mobilities” to illustrate both sudden surges and stoppages of various interconnected flows of mobility and immobility as a result of the global pandemic such as repatriation flights or human and goods smuggling. This special issue therefore seeks to understand the transnational flows within and beyond contemporary Asia from a plurality of perspectives and angles.

Essentially, we position transnational flows not as researched subjects or phenomena but rather as processes that span spaces and times. Moreover, we think of transnational flows not only as movements that are smooth and silky but also as a starting point to dive deeper into matters of immobility and/or fixity, which are integral parts of these flows. The issue thus regards connections and breaks, conjunctions and disjunctions amongst places, spaces, and locations, as well as people, temporalities, experiences, and practices positioned within both national and transnational social spaces. With this conceptualization, the notion of transnational flows contributes to the comprehension of the realities, trends, and possible futures of socio-cultural, economic, religious, and political phenomena in Asia not in phenomenological and static, but rather in processual terms. It sheds light on the speed, density, and acceleration of movements that take place simultaneously across time, space, and scales. Concurrently, the notion provides nuanced perspectives on

how different kinds of movement and mobility are achieved, shaped, facilitated, and intertwined in the region. The notion of transnational flows also invites analysis of the effects of diverse types of borders/boundaries, infrastructures, and institutions on different flows and vice versa, and deepens the scrutiny of power relations, hierarchies, and (in)equalities produced at local, regional, and global levels.

This issue works with transnational flows as a venture point not only in terms of theoretical frameworks and empirical sampling but also in methodological development. In the past three decades, social scientists have been suggesting different clusters of methods to study flows in an increasingly interconnected world. Marcus's classical approach of multi-sited ethnography (1995), for instance, recommends following the studied subjects or objects and tracking their flows through and between spatial and temporal boundaries. Sharing a similar point of view, the mobile method encourages researchers to follow the flows of the movements, travel, and displacements that they aim to study (Büscher et al. 2011; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). Such methods are mobile "not just in making researchers moving with mobile subjects, but also, metaphorically, in researchers being moved by people to the opportunities and the implications for design and future innovation" (Büscher et al. 2011, 9). Specifically, these methods aim to capture flows and movements with mobile strategies, tactics, and tricks that transcend territorial boundaries and pay attention not only to mobility and movements but also to immobility and unmoving conditions (Hannam et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006). Given the aforementioned conceptualization of transnational flows, this special issue also positions transnational flows as a method that takes into account, pursues, and visualizes the different scale, spatial, and temporal variances in cross-border movements as well as the multiplicity and diversity of the contemporary forms of "navigation" through and across Asia. It also calls for more creative and innovative methods in tracing the various types, scales, directions, and characteristics of transnational flows, some of which have been creatively and vividly presented in the works featured in this issue.

Tracing the Transnational Flows of Contemporary Asia

The contributions in this special issue consider different types of transnational flows as crucial elements in constructing the research themes and objects as well as in choosing the theoretical frameworks, analytical units, and methodological instruments. They include one research article and three research notes that scrutinize the transnational flows happening in the Asian region from sociological and anthropological perspectives.

The research article from Li looks at the development of the businesses of new Chinese entrepreneurs in Japan and illustrates how different types of transnational flows allow and shape such a development. The author identifies three types of transnational flow, namely financial, social capital, and commodity flows that significantly affect how Chinese entrepreneurs set up and run transnational

businesses between China and Japan. He also points to the temporal aspect of researching transnational flows as the flows featured in the article do not take place simultaneously but happen step by step depending on the maturity of the transnational business. By investigating the directions of these transnational flows, this article contributes to the issue's characterization of flows as not unidirectional but rather multi-directional and capable of having transnational effects.

Similarly, the research note from Le and Nicolaisen also addresses the direction of transnational flows within, from, and to Asia. In their work, the authors examine transnational flows of tourism that produce, appropriate, and shape the commodification and (de)colonization of certain tourist sites and destinations. Using the cases of the two world heritage sites of Tam Dao and Hoi An in Vietnam, the authors constellate how flows of tourists, global flows of knowledge and aspiration, as well as flows of power, transform local tourist places. Their work urges us to look at the diverse and sometimes contradictory effects that transnational flows can have on specific localities in terms of a place's identities, images, and people.

As mentioned above, the study of transnational flows cannot be fully comprehended without consideration of the interrelationship between mobility and immobility. Sandhya's study on Nepalese labor migrants' waiting period tackles this exact conjunction between mobility and immobility and how such conjunction is an integral part of transnational migration flows. The author argues that the "waiting" and seemingly inactive period during which Nepalese laborers wait to be sent abroad by migration intermediaries does not necessarily render these migrants immobile. Rather, "waiting" is regarded as an expected part of the process of migration and immobility is therefore integral to mobility. In that sense, the transnational flow of labor migration between Nepal and other countries features the interchange of movements and non-movements as well as smooth flows and disruption.

Also taking immobility as the study background, Yang's research note explores how flows of people and objects (medical masks in this case) crossed national borders during the Covid-19 pandemic-induced mobility crisis. The contribution engages with the transnational practices between Nepal and China of *daigou*—the group of people residing outside of China and purchasing goods for people living in China. The author first investigates how transnational flows of merchandise were established, maintained, and developed by *daigou* in pre-pandemic times, and how these flows changed during the pandemic. The research note then examines how *daigou*, despite being physically immobile during the pandemic, made use of the established networks and infrastructures to facilitate the mobility of mask flows from Nepal to China. This work illustrates how different transnational flows connect, support, and even replace one another in different socio-historical periods.

Compiling and presenting a set of research notes and articles that engage with the different transnational flows of contemporary Asia from several perspectives, this special issue wishes to provide a not new, yet timely and sufficient way to study the current trends and realities in Asia. The contributions shed light on the different

types and characteristics of the transnational flows that are shaping the Asian region and therefore enhance the empirical, epistemological, and methodological understandings of the movements and mobilities of different objects and subjects. They also point to the necessity of continuously examining, revising, connecting and subsequently challenging or improving existing theoretical concepts or methodological approaches. Given this necessity, the special issue calls for further studies and works that collectively conceptualize transnational flows as well as their meanings and effects not only within and beyond contemporary Asia but also in other regions and parts of the world.

Acknowledgement

We sincerely thank Beatrice Zani for providing thoughtful comments and support from the beginning until the very end of this project.

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