

# SPECIAL SECTION

## Postcolonial Intersections: Asia on the Move

### Introduction

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#### Abstract

The past decade has witnessed an exponential growth in literature on the diverse forms, practices, and politics of mobility. Research on migration has been at the forefront of this field. Themes in this respect include heterogeneous practices that have developed out of traditions of resistance to a global historical trajectory of imperialism and colonialism. In response to such historical transformations of recent decades, the nature of postcolonial inquiry has evolved. Such changing postcolonial trajectories and power negotiations are more pronounced in specific parts of the world than in others. To that end, “Postcolonial Intersections: Asia on the Move” is a special section that engages, examines, and analyzes everyday power negotiations, focusing particularly on Asia. Such everyday negotiations explicitly point to pressure points and movements across multiple geosocial scales where gender, religion, age, social class, and caste, to name a few, are constantly negotiated and redefined via changing subjectivities.

**Keywords:** Asia, migration, mobility, intersectionality, postcolonial relations

Over the last decade, an exponential literature has focused on the diverse forms, practices, and politics of mobility in order to illuminate the economic, demographic, geopolitical, and cultural dynamics of various forms of movement. Popularly known as the “mobility turn” across disciplines like anthropology, geography, migration studies, science and technology studies, sociology, and transportation research, this paradigm focuses on people, capital, goods, ideas, and ideologies crossing space and time.<sup>1</sup> While human mobility has been the norm rather than the exception throughout history, the analytical interest in mobility dynamics has emerged only recently. Researching movement and its counterpart—sedentarism—with specific analytical tools and lenses, the study of im/mobilities turned into an institutionalized



field of research around two decades ago.<sup>2</sup> Since then, a variety of movements has been discussed and analyzed through the lens of mobilities: from walking to driving, from virtual mobility to transportation, from tourism to migration, from diaspora to pilgrimage.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the tracing of movements of people, objects, and symbols has been developed to an understanding that “[transcends] the dichotomy between transport research and social research, putting social relations into travel and connecting different forms of transport with complex patterns of social experience conducted through communications at a distance.”<sup>4</sup> Mobility as a concept therefore allows an understanding that studies mobile people in connection to material, ideal, and virtual flows. Mobility embraces the manifold connections of these different forms of flows and researches meaning and power as they relate to these processes.<sup>5</sup>

Within this inclusive approach, migration has been at the forefront of research and has been referred to as one of the most prominent forms of mobility.<sup>6</sup> Migration paths often reflect global historical trajectories of powerful conditions (e.g., deriving from imperialism and colonialism). Such global historical trajectories inflect mobile people’s experiences of structure, agency, and identity negotiations during pre- and post-movements. Such everyday negotiations explicitly refer to pressure points and movements across multiple geographic and social scales where axes of differentiations are constantly negotiated and redefined via changing subjectivities. The resulting social status positions are heavily informed by the subject’s gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, and nationality, to name a few axes of differentiations, and are popularly known as people’s intersectionalities.

Historically, the migration literature alluded to changing social status due to intersectional positions that arose primarily from discussions on “bringing gender in” to migration studies as an, if not the most, important category of difference in human mobility.<sup>7</sup> Although scholarship then was far from offering a sophisticated understanding of intersectionality in terms of mobility and migration, some of the earliest significant works in the 1970s, typically early feminist voices, questioned the lacuna on female migrants and started to fill gaps in research in the 1970s, later developing a more universal gender lens in the 1980s and 1990s. In this time, pioneering work was undertaken on myriad and interacting axes of identification and differentiation including race, gender, faith/religion, generation, sexual orientation, and more. This approach can be understood as arising from a correction to an early feminist assumption that the ties that bind women to each other are stronger than the lines dividing them. While the critique began among women of color in the United States<sup>8</sup> and was coined as intersectionality by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw,<sup>9</sup> it has since been widely adopted and adapted.<sup>10</sup> Over time, intersectionality has also become inextricably entwined with feminist epistemology and methodology<sup>11</sup> and is frequently used in feminist research on migration and mobilities.<sup>12</sup> Since processes of identification are continuous

as people are perpetually on the move, we assume this work will eventually be in an infinite loop.

For us, intersectionality is optimized when it is scaled, that is, when examined across multiple geosocial scales simultaneously. In other articles,<sup>13</sup> we have argued that “scaling intersectionality” is an effective road forward toward realizing more of intersectionality’s potential. In particular, we argue for the need for scholars to analyze various axes of differentiation as they interact across multiple analytical scales simultaneously. This enables scholars to see intersectionality more holistically. It also provides analytical advantage to understanding both how people see themselves with respect to the comparative frames of importance to them (whom they esteem, despise, etc.) and how their standpoints position them vis-à-vis others even if they do not make those comparisons themselves.

There is another layer of complexity to this, and one that we focus on this special section: intersectionality faces a “historical dilemma” where identity negotiations in a “postcolonial” era is often examined as, on the one hand, products of historical injustice (of colonialism) and, on the other, intersectional inequality negotiations that have not yet been attenuated or dismantled.<sup>14</sup> Literature in this regard points out that the global rise of nation-states by the end of the twentieth century may indicate the waning of European colonialism, but the historical and cultural consequences of colonialism have continued into the current millennium and inflect several sociodemographic and cultural dynamics today. At the global institutional levels, oppressive power relations have become increasingly complex and puzzling, new inequalities are created, and institutions are seemingly more difficult to transform. Colonialism, as is commonly understood in this literature, is the acceptance and promotion of a dominant group (i.e., colonizer) and their ideologies, beliefs, and cultural practices for the purpose of maintaining hegemonic and central positions of cultural, social, and economic capital.

Postcolonialism, on the other hand, is an analytical and descriptive term for dissenting discourses that counter colonization and subordination focusing on polyvocality and the multiplicity of histories articulated alongside larger social dimensions.<sup>15</sup> These discourses offer an appreciation of multiple points of view and realities as a contestation of domination and the legacies of colonialism.<sup>16</sup> The simultaneous accounting for both the historical and contemporary impacts of oppressive social forces, including the various social status negotiations that arise out of various intersectional arrangements (e.g., racism, homophobia, and other isms) is commonly termed as a critical postcolonial analysis, and one that we adopt in this special section. Such analysis (of a critical postcolonial nature) is neither tied to a single discipline nor bound in a particular time or space; rather, it transcends disciplinary boundaries across the time-space continuum. As the postcolonial scholar of diaspora literature John McLeod writes, “Terrains, people and their relationships,

capital and wealth, power and its resistance, historical continuity and change, representation and culture, knowledge and its transformation: postcolonial studies often involves a prolonged engagement with these issues, and several others besides, in a number of related cultural contexts—either individually, or (as is more frequent) in interdisciplinary clusters.”<sup>17</sup>

Following this direction, themes in this respect include, among other things, heterogeneous practices that have developed out of traditions of resistance against powerful regimes and relationships. In response to historical transformations of recent decades, not surprisingly, the nature of postcolonial inquiry has evolved.<sup>18</sup> The articles in this special section exemplify some of the critical ways in which such changing postcolonial inquiry is best captured. For migration studies, the nature of this inquiry highlights the continued salience of knowledge production that has been significantly influenced and inflected by prolonged periods of colonialism, as well as its structures and practices that continue to circumscribe migration, refuge, and tourism patterns and experiences for people in and/or from former colonies.<sup>19</sup> Such forms of knowledge, recurrently institutionalized, are often taken to be “categories of difference”<sup>20</sup> in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres (e.g., education, the labor market, land ownership, citizenship rights) operating at different scales, from the local to the international and transnational.

Changing postcolonial trajectories, particularly as they involve power negotiations, can be found more pronounced in specific parts of the world than in others. To that effort, “Postcolonial Intersections: Asia on the Move” is a special section that engages, examines, and analyzes everyday power negotiations, focusing particularly on Asia. This region looks back on a multifaceted colonial history involving British, Dutch, French, and Portuguese empires and therewith on equally manifold postcolonial encounters such as civil wars, (armed) struggles, and subtler power negotiations. The latter are still ongoing negotiations as part of the everyday lives of people in Asia. The interwoven categories of difference, related intersectional standpoints, and power structures highly influence the very practical abilities for people to be on the move. Refugees, migrants, tourists, diplomats, and researchers can all be characterized as mobile people. Yet, their ways, forms of movement, and resources depend on employment, assets, passports, and social relations and therewith on powerful structures.

Using mobility as a lens, this special section embraces the emerging different possibilities and forms of movements to analyze conditions, experiences, and perceptions of mobile people in Asia under postcolonial conditions including their means of movement (i.e. transportation) and how the access to and handling of different resources challenges power structures. It spans a breadth of focus areas, from border politics and policies, transportation and urban mobility, and mixed European and indigenous ancestry to music and its role in social activism and mobility, and includes empirical cases from a

wide range of geographic locations in Asia, including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, and South Korea. The special section is heavily interdisciplinary, spanning anthropology, cultural studies, ethnology, history, and sociology, and includes interdisciplinary research. All articles included here are premised on rich empirical data from across a variety of sociocultural contexts in Asia.

Natalia Bloch investigates from an anthropological standpoint how the community of a particular contemporary township (Dharamshala) in India negotiates its identity based on the mobility of the people within this place. Rooted in the British colonial past, refugees, migrants, and tourists constitute this location and make Dharamshala being embedded in mobility. Social solidarity and differentiations in that place are undertaken not (only) along ethnic and cultural lines but (also) on the basis of a shared identity as a corporate community. The place is inhabited not by “natives” but rather by migrants who left their homes for various reasons but have a common goal (i.e., to work in Dharamshala’s tourism sector). Developed into a popular tourist destination after decolonization, the town is inhabited by a “super-diverse” community.

The collaborative article on Southeast Asia, written by an interdisciplinary team of authors—Beth Notar, Kyaw San Min, and Raju Gautam—reflects on different means of transportation in Rangoon, Burma (Yangon, Myanmar). In the time span of British colonialism to today, the authors examine restrictions of transportation means (rickshaws, sideling cars, taxis) that have been embedded in colonial images of “dangerous” migrants. The authors investigate who is classified as a “problematic” group of people for authorities under certain sociohistorical circumstances and is therewith forced either to move or to stop moving (as taxi drivers). In the name of “public order,” “hygiene,” and “modernity,” laborers have been highly regulated in their urban mobilities.

Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson’s article examines people of mixed ancestry, or “Eurasians,” from the Dutch East Indies (today Indonesia) and British India (today India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) and compares them with those of another erstwhile colony, French Indochina (today Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), in the context of decolonization. Through a comparative analysis of three colonial contexts, Jacobsen focuses on a decolonization process that influenced migration and mobility decisions for the “mixed” or “in-between” population in their postcolonial contexts.

William B. Noseworthy’s regionally-comparative article investigates the mobility of the intangible good of music (hip-hop) in East Asia (Japan and South Korea) and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam). The author shows that the different forms of colonialism influence the regional music scenes and lead to specific local appropriations of the same genre of music. He therewith analyzes the mobile processes of cultural expressions and of the physical movements of artists themselves.

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## Notes

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