

## Book Review

*Ethnic Dissent and Empowerment – Economic Migration between Vietnam and Malaysia.* By Tran, A.C.: Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2022. 278 pp.

This book of nine chapters (including the introduction and conclusion chapters) contributes to the broad literature on the plight of transnational migrants, focusing on Vietnamese guest workers in Malaysia. The author places ethnicity (five groups – Kinh, the majority; Hoa, Chinese wealthiest minority; Hre; Khmer; and Cham Muslims), class and gender of the labour sending country (Vietnam) at the center of the analyses, and takes on a comprehensive approach by considering the entire process (predeparture, working overseas and return) of transnational migration.

The emphasis on ethnicity is justified as the Vietnamese migrants are not a monolithic group, and as found in the study, the different ethnic groups occupy different spaces of dissent and responses to the State system. Accordingly, Chapter one sets the context underlying the research by providing a detailed account of the historical, economic and cultural contexts of the five Vietnamese ethnic groups, positioning them on different levels of ethnic hierarchies based on their access to economic (land, finance and education) and cultural (networks, language and religion) resources.

Chapter two focuses on the labour export policies in Vietnam, while Chapter three is on labour recruitment (recruiting, training and documentation). Framing the argument of State-managed transnational labour migration on the Gramscian hegemony in Chapter two, the author validates that transnational State bureaucracies (or the transnational labour brokerage State, LBS) do work together to manipulate the consent of potential migrant workers; however, she goes on to argue that they are not able to fully control or reap the benefits from migrants. The reason being, ethnic workers have developed spaces of dissent for survivability to subvert or contest transnational State power. She refers to this as a “third space”, whereby migrants resist injustice and develop a hybrid culture and a negotiating space. The author defends that the third space perspective provides a richer and better account of the forms of resistance and opposition by migrant workers relative to other analytical frameworks, such as the social networks theory or “weapons of the weak” arguments.

The third space perspective is then deliberated in three theme-based chapters – Chapters four (precarity and coping mechanisms), five (physical third spaces) and six (metaphorical third spaces). Chapter four discusses the different forms of precarity triggered by the LBS system that affected male and female migrants differently, and the gender responses (coping mechanisms) within the five ethnic groups. The forms of empowerment, both internal/ personal (learning new skills/ languages, developing self-fulfillment/ confidence, financial independence) and structural empowerment (collective actions through strikes, protests), are explained based on the social network concept and are somewhat consistent with the migration studies literature.

Chapter five extends the examination of migrant responses that take place in a variety of physical spaces, including hybrid social and cultural spaces. The author finds that in the illegal but licit (socially accepted) third space, all five ethnic groups had employed metaphorical (real and imagined) third space responses in challenging the LBS. The metaphorical third space that is used by the different ethnic groups as discussed in Chapter six includes ironic mimics (lamenting poverty) and subversive mimics (citing state policies).

Finally, Chapter seven analyzes the (positive) forms of empowerment and independence of migrants that have returned to Vietnam. Importantly, the chapter extends the discussion on internal empowerment to include that of stepwise international migration – where migrants aspire to work their way up (“stepwise”) through a hierarchy of destination countries, from Malaysia to Taiwan, Singapore or Japan.

The book, a result of extensive investigations in naturalistic settings in both Vietnam and Malaysia, spanning a period of eight years (2008-2015), is rich with in-depth information that provides insights into the forms of dissent migrants contest transnational State power, and the forms of empowerment when engaging in different spaces of dissent. Using an intersectional approach to examine the afore-mentioned issues, the book offers new contributions to the migration studies literature within the South-to-South labour migration context.

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