Regulatory migration regimes and the production of space: The case of Nepalese workers in South Korea

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A B S T R A C T

This paper engages with contemporary debates in labour geography through its focus on: migrant workers as active agents of change; precarious employment, its complexities and consequences; and the importance of material spaces in migrant labour struggles. Since the early 2000s the South Korean government has been strengthening the institutionalised regulation of low-wage migrant workers. A key tool in this process is the Employment Permit System (EPS), in force since 2004. Under this policy migrant workers are temporary sojourners and effectively socio-politically, culturally and spatially excluded from Korean society. EPS restricts migrants' freedom to choose or change workplaces, which renders them vulnerable to economic and social precarity. Employers use these restrictions to segregate migrant workers from co-nationals, and low-waged migrant workers often find themselves in exploitative working conditions in isolated places. This paper is based on deep ethnographic fieldwork in "Nepal Town" in Seoul and remote Nepalese workers' accommodation. We examine how such precarious working conditions and isolation impact on workers' active involvement in the formation and transformation of Nepal Town in Seoul. We examine the ways in which Nepal Town is a site of spatial agency and praxis for Nepalese workers and explore the potentialities of 'reactive ethnicity'. The empirical insights provided, suggest that the regulatory migration regime for low-wage migrant workers is strongly linked with new formations of material landscapes of connection, mobility, freedom and safe space. Such space production enables migrant workers to perform agency and employ tactics of resistance in order to create spaces of possibility.

1. Introduction

"Seoul: Saturday night, under the colourful glow of neon signs, the street in front of the Dongdaemun Subway Station Exit 3 is crowded with busy passengers and street vendors. Pashupati Supermarket is right next to Exit 3; Everest Curry World and New Lumbini restaurants hang Nepali flags towards the street. Flowing along with Korean traditional trot music from a stall, Nepali is heard from here and there. Namaste dai, Kechha hal khabal? Yaha ke gardai hunuhunchha? Tetikai ghumirakheko Chhu.1 Many individuals and groups of Nepalese are in the main street and the small lanes behind the street. Youngsters leaning on the balustrade of the Exit 3, gaze at passers-by and giggle with each other, they watch people returning from shopping in the Dongdaemun night market, and hometown friends going for a drink in a Nepali restaurant behind the street … [Field notes, October 2012]

This scene, in a very specific part of Seoul, capital of South Korea (hereafter called Korea), is an illustration of the ways in which low-wage migrant Nepalese workers have produced a space of spatial praxis and possibility (Massey, 2005), despite the Korean state's construction of them as migrant workers in precarious employment. As Korea's labour regime seeks to minimise migrants' mobilities and actively establish social, cultural, linguistic and spatial employment isolation, many Nepalese workers counter-seek and produce possibilities of connection, leisure time and resistive possibilities. This spatial landscape of possibility is Nepal Town in Seoul. We show how this space is created in order to reduce isolation and provide relief from oppressive workplace conditions produced through particular practices of capital and the Korean state.

This paper “makes space” for a focus on low-paid Nepalese migrant labour and demonstrates these “workers’ agency” and the importance of a “material landscape” in shaping their resistive...
practices (Coe, 2013: 271). We make an important contribution to 
"reinvigorating debates on agency in labour geographies" (Featherstone and Griffin, 2015: 1) with a detailed focus on 
intra-Asian transnational labour movements between Nepal and 
Korea and closely examine the conditions of precarity faced by 
Nepalese migrant workers in Korea. The term precarity is used in 
a broad sense. We recognise it as a political concept, as a possible 
point of mobilisation (Waite, 2009; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008), 
alongside its meaning related to conditions of work in the types of 
low-end, low-pay employment particularly experienced by 
migrants. Workers’ agency is considered in a more expanded way 
than usually theorised in labour geography (Coe, 2013) through 
focusing on spatial mobility as it represents the agency of migrants 
beyond the workplace (Reid-Musson, 2014; Rogaly, 2009; Buckley, 
2013). We analyse notions of isolation, free/unfree labour (Rogaly, 
2008; McGrath, 2013; Strauss and Fudge, 2014) and spatial exclu-
sion experienced and narrated by the workers. We then explore the 
ways in which Nepalese migrant workers resist these aspects of 
the labour migration regime in order to create a space of connec-
tion, mobility, freedom and safety.

In Section 2 we examine the relevant literature that connects 
migration, public space and ‘resistive’ tactics. Section 3 provides 
an overview of the labour migration situation in Asia, with a spec-
fic focus on the contexts of Korea and Nepal, and details the 
research methods used to gather the empirical data for this paper. 
Section 4 introduces the Nepali–Korean bilateral labour recruit-
ment practices and employment schemes and utilises migrants’ 
narratives of their employment contexts and labour relations. We 
illustrate the ways in which the EPS acts as a process of isolation, 
exclusion and subordination. Section 5 presents a spatial analysis 
of Nepal Town (NT) as a locale of ‘resistance’ (against isolation and 
exclusion), community (emotional and political connections), 
and leisure (respite and ‘being Nepalese’) to demonstrate the ways 
in which Nepalese workers practice active spatial agency. We show 
how NT is being created as a permanent space of resistance, almost 
exclusively for Nepalese migrants, in order to challenge capitalist 
labour politics and rework migrants’ temporariness created by 
the Korean state to improve their conditions of existence and 
everyday lives (Katz, 2004). Nepal Town is becoming a space of 
permanent temporariness (Collins, 2012); the actors in the space 
may change but NT is a place for Nepalese workers at different 
times and stages in their migratory sojourn to find much of what 
is denied them through their employment and by their employers.

2. Migration, public space and resistive tactics

It is increasingly the case that labour mobilities across the 
world are selectively filtered through migration regimes of ‘differ-
cential inclusion’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012). In Asia, while so-
called highly skilled professionals are attracted by offers of path-
ways to permanent residence and naturalization through a range of 
differentiated migration regimes, low-wage migrants are accepted “only within strict functional and temporal limits: they are welcome as workers, but not as settlers; as individuals, but not as families or communities; as temporary sojourners, but not as long-term residents” (Castles, 2003: 11). These regulatory migration regimes and temporary migrant statuses impact on their positions in labour markets, as these low-wage migrants are engaged in precarious employment and rendered unfree in many ways (Strauss and Fudge, 2014; Piper, 2010). This institutionally 
marginized position as temporary migrants also restricts their 
collective action or resistance, including joining unions, to improve 
precarious working and living conditions (Ness, 2011). Moreover, 
although they are admitted as temporary workers, their subjectiv-
estics as social, political and cultural beings are ignored by the host 
society. Castles (2003) argues that while experiencing such differ-
ential exclusion, ethnic, racial and national identification may be 
strengthened and may tend to lead to the production of enclave 
communities. He describes this as “reactive ethnicity: the use of 
ethnic resources, solidarity and symbols to survive in a situation 
of exclusion and disadvantage” (Castles, 2003: 17).

Within the literature on migration in Asia, we can see examples of reactive ethnicity. Low-wage migrant workers dominate partic-
ular parts of urban public space with their co-nationals on their 
days-off: Filipinas in “Little Manila” in Central District (Law, 
2002) and Indonesians at Victoria Park (Constable, 2007) in Hong 
Kong; Filipina workers in Lucky Plaza (Yeoh and Huang, 1998); 
and Tamil workers in Little India (Hamid, 2015) in Singapore. Examinations of labour migration in urban Korea also demonstrate 
the ways in which low-wage migrant workers temporarily or per-
manently form their own spaces, described as “ethnic villages” 
(Kim and Kang, 2007), “ethnic enclaves” (Seol, 2011) and “week-
end enclaves” (Jung, 2010).

What is apparent is that relationships between migrants and 
ethnicised spaces provide insights into the ways in which states 
structure and implement their migration regimes. Different rules 
and regulations of the state are central to facilitating or constraining 
the mobility of migrants and their ways of making such spaces 
(Collins, 2012). In this sense, the production of these spaces can be 
read as a form of survival and settlement strategy for low-wage 
migrant workers, creating a sense of security for themselves in pre-
carious working and living conditions and in the face of processes of 
exclusion in the host countries. Migrant workers make a home, 
share a sense of community and take respite from hard working 
conditions by producing their own spaces.

Hence, what might be witnessed is the appropriation of ‘public 
space’ by groups of migrant workers. Public space is “relatively open to a range of people and behaviours” but it is “never com-
pletely open” (Staeheli et al., 2009: 634). For migrant workers 
whose social and spatial exclusion is taken for granted, the appro-
priation of public space means “empowerment, having a voice to 
invert stigma, and a stage to set up their own performance” (Goff-
man, 1971, cited in Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014). In Hong 
Kong and Singapore, this migrant agency challenges dominant 
social practices, as casual gatherings of migrants in ‘weekend 
enclaves’ assert their right to use public space and to construct 
counter spaces’ (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). These may appear to be 
exclusionary practices, but as Staeheli et al. (2009) show using 
Arab Town in Los Angeles as an example, for marginalized groups, 
spaces of exclusion offer a safe space to be in public.

Such space production enables migrant workers to employ tac-
tics (de Certeau, 1984) that might create ‘spaces of possibility’ 
(Massey, 2005). In this paper, we consider a range of spatial tactics 
and agencies for such productions of space (Lefebvre, 1991). We 
consider visibility through walking (de Certeau, 1984) and loitering 
in public space (Phadke, 2013) as tactical practices “through which 
users re-appropriate the space organised by techniques of socio-
cultural production” (de Certeau, 1984, xiv). Such visibility also 
implies “a demand for social recognition which entails becoming 
full actors who can display their own identity and specificity in 
public space” (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014: 646). Further-
more, visibility in public space is important for migrants to coun-
teract isolation and fear by connecting themselves with 
organisations and networks that work to protect their rights 
(staeheli et al., 2009). As some studies show (Constable, 2007; 
Law, 2002), this space may embrace possibilities for political forms 
of mobilisation such as mass protests and demonstrations against 
regulatory migration regimes. Therefore, migrant workers’ 
agency and spatial strategies in public suggest the possibilities of 
labour struggles beyond the workplace (Herod, 1998; Will, 2001).
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