



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum)

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

Seonyoung Seo<sup>a,\*</sup>, Tracey Skelton<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, AS2, 03-01, 1 Arts Link, Kent Ridge, Singapore 117570, Singapore

<sup>b</sup> Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, AS2, 04-18, 1 Arts Link, Kent Ridge, Singapore 117570, Singapore

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 31 July 2015

Received in revised form 1 February 2016

Accepted 1 February 2016

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

Migrant workers

Agency

Migration regimes

Precarity

Nepal

Korea

## ABSTRACT

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.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 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 ghimirakheko Chhu.*<sup>1</sup> 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

Dongdeamun 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-see 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

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [seonyoung.seo@u.nus.edu](mailto:seonyoung.seo@u.nus.edu) (S. Seo), [geost@nus.edu.sg](mailto:geost@nus.edu.sg) (T. Skelton).

<sup>1</sup> "Hello, brother", "How are you doing?", "What are you doing here?", "Just walking around".

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 exclusion 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 connection, 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 specific 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 recruitment 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 ‘differential inclusion’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012). In Asia, while so-called highly skilled professionals are attracted by offers of pathways 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 marginalized 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 subjectivities as social, political and cultural beings are ignored by the host

society. Castles (2003) argues that while experiencing such differential 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 particular 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 permanently 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 precarious 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 completely open” (Staeheli et al., 2009: 634). For migrant workers whose social and spatial exclusion is taken for granted, the appropriation of public space means “empowerment, having a voice to invert stigma, and a stage to set up their own performance” (Goffman, 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 tactics (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). Furthermore, visibility in public space is important for migrants to counteract 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, 2001; Wills, 2001).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات