

## **Report on “Wind over Water: An Anthropology of Migration in an East Asian Setting”**

Berkeley, California, November 17 – 18, 2008

On November 17 and 18, a workshop on East Asian migration was held at the Institute of East Asian Studies of the University of California, Berkeley. The workshop was made possible by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

The general premise of the workshop was that the East Asian experience with migration has been underrepresented in discussions about global migration, and that there are issues of both data and theoretical perspective from East Asia that could greatly leaven those discussions. The workshop was in three main parts: (a) general theoretical and methodological issues; (b) consideration of the way migrants and cities mutually affect each other (the examples were Beijing, Hong Kong, Nagoya, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo); and (c) analysis of the dynamics of four particular kinds of migrants: labor migrants, professional/business migrants, international spouses, and tourists (both short- and long-stay). Participants were drawn largely from East Asia, but with some representation as well of U.S.-based scholars.

It is, of course, difficult to summarize this kind of workshop. Rather than listing presentations, I will thus simply present five key themes that emerged in discussion. They provide at least some flavor of the workshop.

- 1) Workshop discussion often returned to the degree to which people and objects are in motion in different kinds of ways. Migrants, after all, are quite varied in their trajectories, from low-skill labor to highly talented professionals, from female entertainers to international brides, from short-term tourists to long-stay retirees.
- 2) The nature of “skill” received some critical questioning. Migration scholars often talk about low-skilled labor versus high-skilled “talent,” but the actual level of skill is often far more complex than those simple categories would suggest. Whether as club hostesses or health care providers, for example, many female migrants have very high levels of social and personal skills—for which they often receive relatively low rewards.
- 3) The family dynamics of migration also frequently emerged in discussion. The life history of migrant families is often very complex with interweaving strands of general social change (for example, that women have greater access to more jobs) and the developmental cycle of the household (for example, that women may move in or out of the labor force depending on the presence and age of children). The implication is that, as we attempt to grasp all the kinds of migration that now exist, we must also think more prospectively about how families develop over time both with and without migration.

4) Distinctions that initially seemed solid became blurred over the course of the workshop. For example, migration research is often based on very conventional notions of migration, that people move from here to there (or there to here) and do so with some finality. One result is the frequent dichotomization of temporary versus permanent migrants. Yet the reality is that much migration is quite indeterminate in duration. Another frequent assumption is that people move from the familiar to the strange. Yet this too is often misleading. Many migrants go to places with which they already have some experience, so there can be considerable familiarity. On the other hand, many migrants are returnees to their original homes who find a place that has often become quite *unfamiliar*.

5) Finally, there was much discussion at the workshop of levels of research and of theory. Migration, after all, is not just about people moving from place to place and often across national borders. It is also about the local, national, regional, and global domains and institutions that shape the flows of migration and the experiences of migrants. While traditional ethnography is a very effective tool for assessing the experience of people who have moved, it has limitations in analyzing the structures and processes which enable (or forestall) that movement.

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Submitted by David W. HAINES