

EXPOSÉ OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Negotiating Sexualities and Masculinities in Transnational Migration: Vietnamese Male Migrants in Contemporary Japan

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I. Research Idea

The movement of people across borders involves a wide range of social practices, in which negotiations are constantly embedded. Transnational migrants negotiate not only the motivations to move, labor and economic practices, changes in social status, means of education and life styles but also more intimate spheres of social life such as emotional needs, sexual and gender behaviors. The sexual dimension of migration, however, had historically been marginalized and is still ‘absent as a social factor in mainstream sociological studies of transnational migration’ (Carrillo 2017; Manalansan IV 2006). Besides, transnational migration is a highly gendered activity. Although the feminization of migration in and from Asia within recent decades has drawn much attention to the gendered aspects in female migrants’ experiences, such perspectives in the journeys of Asian male migrants in Asian contexts are either taken for granted or remain understudied (Lin 2013; Louie and Low 2003).

Drawing on the sociologies of transnational migration, gender and sexuality, this dissertation aims to examine the intersection between male migrants’ masculinities, sexualities and cross-border mobilities. In particular, it inquires into the complex negotiations of sexualities and masculinities among Vietnamese male migrants of various sexual and gender identities in contemporary Japan, whose population has been rapidly increasing. Within the last five years, Vietnamese has always been among one of the largest group of foreign resident in Japan. Making up more than half of this tally is male-identify migrants, who migrate mostly as students, technical trainees or high-skilled labors. The Vietnam-Japan transnational flow of migrants is likely to continue increasing as a new Japanese immigration policy has just been implemented, allowing more foreign labors into the country. Since sexuality and gender identities attribute significantly to individuals’ social lives and identities, this dissertation aims to gain insights into migrants’ transnational identities as well as experiences of inclusion and marginalization via the understanding of the processes in which male migrants’ sexualities and masculinities are affected, challenged and (re)negotiated in transnational contexts. Besides, the dissertation also examines the ways migrants’ transnational sexual and gender practices cast effects on social structures and institutions in both home and destination countries, and therefore provides a bottom-up empirical approach for the study of the interrelationship between individual actors and institutions in transnational migration.

II. Research Questions

- Whether cross-border mobilities lead to the formation of transnational sexualities and masculinities?
- How do migrants' sexualities and masculinities affect their transnational migration decision making and behaviors? And vice versa, how do migratory experiences shape migrants' sexual and gender practices and identities in transnational contexts?
- What are the strategies of male migrants to negotiate their sexualities and masculinities in transnational migration? What are the factors that condition such negotiation?
- How do migrants' gender and sexual behaviors in transnational migration affect social institutions and ideologies in both sending and receiving contexts?

III. Scientific Relevance

The turn of the 21st century has been marked by increasing social and geographical dissociations at all levels of society, as people, goods and ideas experience hypermobility across national borders. As a result, numerous aspects in migrants' social lives have been taking place simultaneously in both sending and receiving contexts. Contemporary transnational migration is understood not as a permanent move from one nation-state to another, but a process taking place within fluid social spaces constantly reworked through migrants' embeddedness in multi-layered and multi-sited arenas (Faist 2000; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Transnationalism therefore has become one of the fundamental ways of understanding contemporary migrant practices and identities (Yeoh et al. 2003).

Among various facets of transnational migration, scholars tend to examine those that are easily observed and measured such as economic, political, social networks. Economic sphere, for example, has been extensively studied because of the visibility of migrants' remittances as well as the emergence of actors in transnational economic domains (Guarnizo 2003; Portes et al. 1999; Vertovec 2009). Aspects that are deeply felt and embedded in migrants' social life yet not overtly expressed such as emotions, gender and sexuality, however, receive far less attention (Levitt et al. 2003). Although transnational migrants are constantly negotiating their self-identities in transnational spaces, few scholarships have surpassed nationally defined categories to inquire into what gender and sexual practices and identities actually mean when they are constructed transnationally.

Sexualities and genders are neither monolithic, but negotiated through complex, conflicting and fluid social structures and institutions (Cantú 2009; Javaid 2019). Transnational migration therefore can open up new spaces for newly emerging sexual and gender practices and identities (Carrillo et al. 2014; Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Kong 2002; Paquin 2014; Walsh et al. 2008). At the same time, certain gender practices can also be reproduced and sexual constraints can be (re)imposed (Vasquez del Aguila 2013; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). While migration affects almost all dimensions of social life, much of the migration literature tends to have a binary between male and female migrants. In particular, male migrants are commonly examined in their economic and production spheres, and female migrants' sexual and gender dimensions receive more attention. This generic view has not only failed to explore the variances in men's experiences (Hibbins and Pease 2009), but also repeated the gender-blind and sexual-blind analysis of migration studies in the past and regenerated certain stereotypes.

An approach that takes into account the diversity in male migrants' sexual and gender experiences is through the conceptualization of their bodies, where gendered and sexual selves are expressed and cultural norms are made concrete (Carrillo 2017; Gorman-Murray 2007). Studies on sexual and gender identities among Asian male migrants, however, mainly focus on the experiences in Western contexts, in which migrants' sexualities and masculinities are negatively impacted by legacies of white hostility and colonialism, gendered labour practices, degrading media representations, and racial and class hierarchies (Ahmad 2009; Fung 1996; Han 2006, 2008; Hibbins 2005; Nguyen 2014). In East Asia, scholars working on sexualities and masculinities might also easily fall into the mould of East-West comparisons, with Western ideas being standardized (Louie 2012; McLelland 2000, 2005; Mckintosh 2010; Suganuma 2012). Indeed, one needs to be aware of the 'plurality of Asian masculinities' (Lin et al. 2017; Louie and Lowe 2003; Roberson and Suzuki 2003) and the 'processes of contested hybridization' of sexualities in East Asia (Pendleton 2015). Examining the ways in which Asian male migrants negotiate their sexualities and masculinities within Asian contexts therefore provides more nuanced perspectives to deviate from a Western reductionist approach of looking at genders and sexualities. Empirical studies of these aspects in the grounded reality of individuals whose lives transcend borders hence allow understandings of not only the construction of migrants' identities, collective belongings and social fields (Gorman-Murray 2009; Lewis and Naples 2014; Yuval-Davis 2006), but also the transformation of institutions, structures and ideologies as a result of transnational migration.

IV. Theoretical Frameworks

A suitable conceptual framework to understand transnational movements and practices should not merely restrict itself to migration, but rather seek to link analysis of migratory processes to broader social theory and the analysis of societal changes (Castles 2010: 1582-3). This dissertation thus proposes to utilize a ‘conceptual cross-fertilization’ (Vertovec 2009) between theoretical concepts from sociology and transnational migration studies in order to make sense of migrants’ live reality. In particular, sociological concepts of: ‘social field’ (Bourdieu 1993), ‘sexual field’ (Green 2008, 2015), ‘the presentation of self’ and ‘the management of stigma’ (Goffman 1956,1963), and ‘forms of masculinity’ (Connell 2005) would be considered within transnational contexts. Besides, concepts such as ‘transnational social field’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2014) and ‘transnationalism’ (Portes et al. 1999; Vertovec 2009) would also be utilized.

By looking at migrants’ complex negotiation of sexualities and masculinities in transnational migration, this dissertation has three theoretical contributions. First, it addresses the understudied state of male migrants’ sexualities and masculinities in transnational migration. Second, the dissertation provides insights on the interrelation between social institutions, structures and landscapes in both sending and receiving societies and migrants’ transnational social lives and identities. Lastly, it aims to explore the concepts of transnational sexualities and transnational masculinities and the ways in which they are constructed and different from nationally-bounded sexualities and masculinities.

V. Research Design and Methodology

This dissertation uncovers the ways in which sexualities and masculinities are negotiated in transnational migration by taking the individual unit of analysis. Empirical data would be drawn mainly on qualitative methods, including:

- *Life-history interviews* with Vietnamese male-identifying migrants and former migrants in Japan to explore their sexual and gendered experiences, perceptions and reflections throughout the life-course, with regard to temporal and spatial varieties.
- *Ethnographic fieldwork* and *participant observation* in Japan and Vietnam to understand the organization of social structures that shape migrants’ everyday-life negotiations of sexual and masculine practices and ideologies.

VI. Bibliographies

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