

GSAPS THE SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

Mobility as a Way of Life: European Millennials' Labour Migration to Asian Global Cities

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In this dissertation, I use the concept of 'Generation Erasmus' to introduce a new mobility phenomenon of highly educated European millennials' migration beyond Europe. The dissertation suggests that migration to Asian global cities enables the young adults to construct a coherent narrative of their multiple identities as European millennials, citizens of the world and middle-class professionals. As such, the phenomenon is more than just a "rites of passage." In a world where some speak of "the decline of the West" (Fischer 2018) and others speak of the "Asian century" (Lee 2017) these millennial Europeans' view of the world has shifted. The dissertation reveals that despite initially rather short-term plans – or no plans beyond the move itself at all – many end up to stay and become 'real' labour migrants in and across Asian destinations

Against the conventional way of treating work and non-work as dichotomies, I argue that none of the two dimensions is convincing enough to explain Generation Erasmus' mobilities. Their pathways are product of forging a life made up of and woven together through work, leisure and socialising practices. Therefore, I appropriate Krings et al.'s (2013) concept of "worklife pathways" as a useful tool for understanding this mobility phenomenon. The arguments of the dissertation are based on ethnographic field work in Singapore and Tokyo, two global cities which represent the two poles of Asian cities regarding composition of society and reception of foreign labour. I conducted qualitative interviews with a core group of 70 predominantly white millennials from the European Union and interviewed the majority of them multiple times between 2014 and 2018. By the focus on movement to, from and between these two and other Asian destinations, the dissertation points to a complex mobility phenomenon which only a multi-sited approach is able to reveal.

Europeans' imaginations of, touchpoint to and eventual motivation for moving to Asia can be captured by four ideal types: lifestyle migrants, cultural enthusiasts, global professionals and economic refugees. Despite their differences, migrants hold a shared European perspective and Singapore and Tokyo appeal to them in a similar way. Those cities' attractiveness lies in the images of an 'exotic' far-away continent and, at the same time, favourable conditions for migration. This generational migration phenomenon reflects broader social processes, especially individualisation and self-enterprise, which become possible for everyone in different socio-cultural and economic contexts as the comparative case reveals.

Findings demonstrate that the young Europeans enter the host country labour markets through poorly understood institutional channels. A significant number of the migrants, after graduation from university and independent migration, compete with the native population for local jobs. However, the young Europeans lack the status and the security net which their expatriate and diplomat forebears in Singapore or Tokyo held. Instead, they strategically activate their motility, or potential to move (Kaufmann et al. 2004), in order to secure employment in the host societies. In contrast to their senior co-ethnics, the young, mostly white, migrants stick out in their Asian workplaces precisely because they lack their forebears' status.

While migrants' whiteness alienates them in both cities at times, gender marks the biggest difference of the two field sites. European women in Singapore perceive their professional opportunities to be better than in Europe's often more gender biased corporate structures. Women in Tokyo,

on the other hand, realise how their "double otherness" as foreigner and woman work against them. Overall, the young migrants in both cities feel insecure concerning their future prospects and thus attempt to upgrade their skills and professionalise themselves. Their growing cultural, social and geographical distance alienates many from their home country labour markets. These young adults, by accumulating work experience far away from Europe, adopt new perspectives on the world's emerging economic players and see their own future with less Eurocentric eyes.

Migrants in both field sites struggle to carve out their own space in the host society. They contest existing hierarchies which stipulate Westerners to be senior and affluent. Their boundary work shows two diametrical dynamics. They erect vertical boundaries which separate them from their co-ethnics who are "above" them in terms of age, income and status. At the same time, they, to some extent, horizontally cross ethnic boundaries. Additionally, patterns of intimacy shape the young Europeans' socialising practices and geographical mobility in various ways. While some migrants seem to settle with a local spouse in the Asian host city, the majority, as dual career couples or independent singles, orient themselves at opportunities around the globe and identify with other mobility-experienced young professionals of different ethnic, national and religious backgrounds.

The case of Generation Erasmus suggests mobility as a pervasive element of their lives. Mobility constitutes a discourse, a norm, an object of desire. It is increasingly a tool for sustaining a middle-class living standard and an upward mobile career in a globalised world and the opportunities and risks of an integrating European Union. Migrants' middle-class backgrounds, EU passports and the availability of modern communication technology all facilitate their geographical mobility. Their pathways to, across and beyond Asia enable them to design a biography which allows to reconcile their professional aspirations with their cosmopolitan orientation.

However, these migrants' journey is not a smooth one. Despite their privileges as mostly white EU citizens, they still constantly struggle against restrictive migration regimes, nationalistic policies and cultural obstacles. As such, the study is informative for immigration policies especially in Japan, which has lately attracted but failed to retain skilled foreign labour. Furthermore, the awareness of the irreversibility of the mobile lifepath and the impossibility to return to a sheltered European home is emotionally constraining. Migrants' longing for differentiation has led to their own and their childhood peers' definition of them as others. Nevertheless, the narrative of the mobile life provides them guidance for their early adulthood. The increase in the mobile middle classes, the gradual re-working of ethnic and national boundaries and the world's changing global power balance seem to indicate a growth in similar migratory movements.

References

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