Children, Families, and Mobility in Southeast Asia

Convenors: Harriot Beazley, Department of Geography, School of Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia (hbeazley@usc.edu.au) & Leslie Butt, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, Canada (lbutt@uvic.ca)

In contemporary Southeast Asia, neoliberal economic regimes have led to a rise in transnational labour, and an accompanying surge in family fragmentation. Social and geographical mobility has also increasingly become a crucial factor in the trajectories to adulthood for many young people in Southeast Asian societies. In this era of intensified global mobility, the separation of children and young people from their parents has become a taken-for-granted way of life for some families in the region. For young people, the opportunity to migrate independently, or the reality of having to live separately from their parents for extended periods, may be compelling for some, and deeply traumatic for others.

This panel explores the variety of mobilities children and young people experience, revealing the ways contemporary economies intersect with young people’s everyday realities. We explore how children respond to shifts in family connections; from engaging with new social networks arising from transnational labour migration, to dealing with increasing family fragmentation and instabilities in the domestic domain. We seek to give voice to the affective experiences of children and their families, and to explore what their insights can tell us about wider dominant discourses at the level of culture, state, and the Southeast Asian region.

Panel

Chair: Leslie Butt, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, Canada (lbutt@uvic.ca)

1. Rural Mobility and Urban Immobility: Comparative Perspectives on Migration, Movements and Children’s Lives in Flores and Sabah
   Catherine Allerton, London School of Economics, UK, (C.L.Allerton@lse.ac.uk)

2. “It Hurts to Know you are Always on the Outside”: Young People’s Experiences Migrating from Plantations to Towns in Malaysia
   Kabita Chakraborty, York University, Canada (kabitac@yorku.ca)

3. The Effect of Tourism on the Geographies and Identities of Children in Siem Reap, Cambodia
   Mandie Miller, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia (amiller1@usc.edu.au)

4. “Child” and “Youth” Migrants are Caregivers Too: Case Studies from Central Java, Indonesia
   Carol Chan, University of Pittsburgh, USA (carolchan@pitt.edu)

5. Liminal childhoods: Meaning-making, developmental and migration trajectories of Myanmar youth living as forced migrants in Thailand
   Jessica Ball, University of Victoria, Canada (jball@uvic.ca), and Sarah Moselle, Aga Khan Foundation (sarahnmoselle@gmail.com)

6. Unequal Childhoods and Youth in a Cross-border Economy: A Lao-Thai Case Study
   Roy Huijsmans, Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands (r.b.huijsmans@gmail.com)

7. ‘Like it, Don’t Like it, You Have to Like it’: Children’s Emotions and Absent Parents in Migrant Communities of Lombok, Indonesia
   Harriot Beazley, University of Sunshine Coast, Australia (hbeazley@usc.edu.au) and Leslie Butt, University of Victoria, Canada (lbutt@uvic.ca)

8. A Good Global Childhood: Child Rearing and Social Mobility in Filipino Translocal Families
   Deirdre McKay, Keele University, UK (d.c.mckay@keele.ac.uk)
Abstracts:

1. **Rural Mobility and Urban Immobility: Comparative Perspectives on Migration, Movements and Children’s Lives in Flores and Sabah**
   Catherine Allerton, (Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, London, UK)
   
   This paper contrasts the mobility of young people in two different ethnographic contexts: those born in rural west Flores, eastern Indonesia, and those born in urban Sabah, East Malaysia to parents from east Flores. It describes an unexpected and paradoxical situation: whilst in rural villages in west Flores, children’s mobility is central both to productive family life and to educational aspiration, in urban Sabah, the children of Indonesian migrants experience their lives largely in terms of immobility and feeling ‘stuck’. In Sabah, children’s opportunities are defined by their parents’ original migration across Southeast Asian borders, even whilst their own lives lack such cross-border movements. As the Malaysian migration regime has gradually become harsher, migrants and their families have lost opportunities both for transnational and social mobility, separating some children from their siblings, and leading to educational exclusion. By contrast, in west Flores, youthful mobility has long been connected with the pursuit of schooling, and migration within Indonesia offers avenues for temporary adventure. The paper concentrates, in particular, on the affective experiences of the children of migrants in Sabah, and their ambiguous sense of connection to a largely imagined ‘homeland’.

2. **“It Hurts to Know you are Always on the Outside”: Young People’s Experiences Migrating from Plantations to Towns in Malaysia**
   Kabita Chakraborty, (Department of Children’s Studies, York University, Toronto, Canada)
   
   Plantation communities around Southeast Asia are in flux. While plantation work continues to thrive in some areas, in semi-rural Malaysia oil palm plantations are a sunset industry. For thousands of Tamil families working in this sector the transition out of the plantations into *teloks* (towns) has been a family affair. Entire families make the shift out of spaces which they have occupied for over a hundred years. The movement as a joint family is a protective strategy, often undertaken to safeguard children from emotional distress. However, once in *teloks* children find themselves negotiating modern town life with little understanding from families at home. This paper maps the transition of a handful of young people from the plantation into towns, and how this transition impacts friendship and family life. I show how young people strive to be cool and accepted into peer circles which often exclude them. Young people’s own strategies to fit in will be detailed, and how these strategies are influenced by the racial politics of Malaysian society will be explained. I also explore how young people manage family members who are suddenly viewed as overbearing and overprotective in the *teloks*. Overall the paper provides a youth-centred perspective of rapid social and economic transitions within the oil palm plantation industry in Malaysia.

3. **The Effect of Tourism on the Geographies and Identities of Children in Siem Reap, Cambodia.**
   Mandie Miller, (Department of Geography, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia)
   
   In 1992 the Angkor Archaeological Park was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, with internationals visitors to the local town of Siem Reap rising from 7,000 in 1992 to 2.1 million visitors in 2015. In recent years high levels of youth migration have occurred in Cambodia due to a rapid growth in the tourism and industrial sectors, with 2.5 million people aged between 15 and 29 now classified as internal migrants. To date tourism geographies have generally overlooked the experiences of children and young people in...
developing country contexts, whose lived worlds have been created, moulded and structured by global market forces in the form of tourism, including voluntourism and orphanage tourism. This paper examines the multiple factors that created a wave of migration of children and young people to Siem Reap in the past twenty years. By utilising participatory research approaches in Siem Reap between 2013 and 2015 with young people between the ages of 14 and 24, the study describes young people’s experiences from their own perspective. Research participants included children and young people working on the streets of Siem Reap in the tourist areas, and children who were the subjects of orphan tourism and voluntourism initiatives.

4. “Child” and “Youth” Migrants are Caregivers Too: Case Studies from Central Java, Indonesia

Carol Chan, (Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, USA)

In 2014, six million Indonesian labor migrants sent USD 8.55 billion in remittances. Approximately 60% of them are women in domestic and factory work in Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), East and Southeast-Asian countries. It is an open secret that many of these women are under the national legal minimum age of eighteen for migrants, and twenty-one for domestic workers. Many young migrants circumvent these laws by traveling with “false-but-legal” documents. Yet these migrants are seldom considered “child laborers” by migration scholars, NGOs, and government officials. Yet these young women, regardless of their age, are often treated as child-like persons who require adult instruction, protection, and advice.

This paper draws on case studies from 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Jakarta and Central Java, Indonesia. Through women’s narratives of migration and return, I show how, through discursive, performative, and practical strategies, they resist infantilization and governance as “children” or “child-like.” Many embark on journeys explicitly in order to care for their parents, siblings, or other kin. By suggesting that many female labor migrants may be understood in terms of child or youth migrants, I build on scholars who interrogate assumptions that children “left behind” are passive victims of parents’ migration. I show how children are not only recipients of care by adults, but in fact, often migrate out of desires or obligations to provide care for their adult kin. Such mobilities often contribute to reifying filial piety and the primacy of the parent-child bond. Simultaneously, they prolong and remake meanings of childhood, adolescence, and parenthood.

5. Liminal childhoods: Meaning-making, developmental and migration trajectories of Myanmar youth living as forced migrants in Thailand

Jessica Ball, (School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada), and Sarah Moselle, (Aga Khan Development Network, Kyrgyzstan)

While migration and refugee studies have elaborated upon themes of voice, subjectivity, and agency of mobile adults, the voice and subjectivity of forced migrant children have been comparatively neglected. This paper explores developmental experiences and resettlement aspirations of youth growing up as undocumented, forced migrants outside of their parents’ countries of origin. During decades of armed conflict and economic collapse in Myanmar resulted in millions of forced migrants living in Thailand, China, and Malaysia. The paper focuses on forced migrant youth from Myanmar who have grown up along the northwest border of Thailand. They are often stateless and disconnected from their families, communities, and cultures of origin and excluded from institutional affiliations, living perched on the edge of society in a liminal state. The paper explores the psychological ramifications of growing up in conditions of extreme marginalization, and contributes to a nascent discourse about children on the move as actively engaged in meaning-making and as carriers of globalization. We identify key sources of vulnerability for these children as well as evidence from preliminary research of resilience and strength, challenging the victim-agency binary and foundation theories of child development. With an almost universal ceasefire agreement between the quasi-democratic government of Myanmar and ethnic minority
groups, there are external pressures to resolve the liminal status of forced migrant youth. This paper points to evidence that children not only have the right but also the capacity to contribute meaningfully to deliberations about how to resolve their displaced and undocumented status in terms of repatriation, assimilation into a host country or resettlement.

6. Unequal Childhoods and Youth in a Cross-border Economy: A Lao-Thai Case Study
   Roy Huijsmans, (Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands)

Challenging the national scale as an unquestioned analytical frame in much of the children and youth studies literature, I adopt in this paper a trans-border perspective that centralises borderlands. In doing so, I focus on a Lao-Thai borderland and draw on ethnographic research conducted in this areas since 2007. Borderlands I conceptualise as ambiguous spaces shaped by flows and interruptions, similarities and differences, relations and contestations, and histories and futures. In these borderlands young people move across the border continuously, overtly and for various reasons (despite its political sensitivity). This includes work, leisure, love, and petty trade. These flows, I argue, are at least in part produced by the very different ways in which childhood and youth are constituted on both sides of the border. This is particularly evident in relation to work. Work is an intrinsic part of young lives on the Lao side of the border, whereas on the Thai side this has largely been displaced by schooling (including private tuitions after regular day school). At the same time, widespread demand for young Lao labour on the Thai side of the border has given Lao youngsters access to significant amounts of cash to realise rural Lao modernities, accentuated generational and agrarian relations on the Lao side of the border, but also initiated young Lao villagers into migrant endeavours further into Thailand. Young Lao villagers’ cross-border mobilities, thus, simultaneously reinforce existing relations of inequality whilst reconfiguring social life in these borderlands in novel ways.

7. ‘Like it, Don’t Like it, You Have to Like it’: Children’s Emotions and Absent Parents in Migrant Communities of Lombok, Indonesia
   Harriot Beazley, (Department of Geography, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia), and Leslie Butt, (Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada)

This paper explores the experiences and emotions of children and young people whose parents have migrated for work overseas, leaving them behind at home with relatives or community members. The complexity of children’s emotions is placed at the forefront, addressing a legacy of scholarship which has at times oversimplified or diminished children’s experiences in debates about the cultural logic and traditions of family migration in Southeast Asia. The paper contributes to a growing body of work that emphasises children’s own agency in constructing their own experiences in the context of longstanding family experiences of transnational migration. Through a child-centered research approach carried out in 2014, we reveal the emotions and experiences of children of migrant parents from three ‘migrant-sending’ villages in rural east Lombok, Indonesia. Focussing on their reactions to community expectations that children should accept absent parents as an unavoidable challenge and a necessary part of life, we describe the complex and deep feelings children articulate around expectations that, ‘like it or don’t like it’, they have to accept their parents’ absence. By concentrating on children’s own views and experiences, we contribute to burgeoning debates about the affective implications of migration in the Southeast Asia region.

8. A Good Global Childhood: Child Rearing and Social Mobility in Filipino Translocal Families
   Deirdre McKay, (Department of Geography, Keele University, Keele, UK)

Fostering and extended family arrangements for childrearing have a long history in Southeast Asia. These
arrangements have continued in the age of migration. Migrants’ children continue to be raised by extended kin, but may now move back and forth between parents overseas and kin in sending communities. Families intend these mobile and networked arrangements to provide their children with a ‘good’ childhood. This paper examines how people define the elements of this ‘good’ childhood. I use case study material from Filipino migrants in the UK and families in the northern Philippines to examine ideals for child-rearing practices. Through this material, I explore how these ideals increasingly serve as markers for - and strategies of - broader social mobility. Finally, I describe how these same strategies are geared to raise ‘global Filipinos’ as opposed merely national citizens and how this global imaginary is appropriated and mobilized by the neoliberal state.

Discussant: Karen Wells, Birkbeck College, University of London, London, UK.