

Transnational Education as an Emerging Feature of Migration

AnalizaLiezl Perez-Amurao

Mahidol University International College, Thailand

0675

The Asian Conference on Education 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This paper focuses on the current trajectories of a diasporic movement in Southeast Asia, particularly migrants' engagement in cross-border education as an emerging feature within the Thai migrant social space. This paper discusses the transnational nature of migration and how it particularly impacts on relevant teaching-learning landscape vis-à-vis the changing structures of education via technology. An emerging issue that is under-researched and under-represented in the regional and international academic discussions and the global public sphere, this paper employs qualitative research as its main design. Over-all, this study culls together data from a survey, interviews, ethnographic observations aided by a social network, Facebook, and the analysis of four Bangkok-based migrant workers' life narratives, documenting their bid to participate in cross-border education and exploring how said engagement relates to their identity formation and practice of agency.

Keywords: Filipino diaspora, migration, cross-border education via technology

Introduction

The bombing incident during the Boston Marathon in April 2013 raised a number of questions that not only had to do with the Tsarnaev brothers' personal issues. The unfortunate incident also propelled many to dig into a number of factors that could have possibly led the two to commit such a crime. A good number of conjectures were looking to immigration issues for possible explanation. The Tsarnaev brothers' case, however, was not the only incident linked to mobility issues, with migrants as the main actors. In 2005, mass riots in France were considered to be closely related to the country's immigration condition with mostly second-generation migrants behind said civil unrest. To be sure, such incidents could not be claimed as the sole consequence of migration. With people constantly in search of places to move to, temporarily or permanently, their mobility results in a myriad of activities as well. These activities, it has to be further noted, do not necessarily always carry with them negative undercurrents such as the incidents cited above, if indeed they were migration-related. These activities may very well bring with them constructive qualities. In both cases, however, these activities may be linked to those that do not exclusively take place in the host-country. With the advent of technology and other transformative networks, these activities are being facilitated in two or more countries where the principal actors are found. Viewing "International migration...[as] a central dynamic within globalization" (Castles & Miller, 2009, p. 3), this phenomenon ushers in the concept of transnationalism. Transnationalism, whose first trickle of usage came about in the late 1980's, refers to the "sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states" (Vertovec, 2009, p. 1-2). Simply put, transnationalism is what people engage in as they build and maintain alliances despite being separated by national borders and territories. Transnationalism has come under a prism of overlapping pursuits and is articulated in different forms and for various agenda. These agenda range from social, political, economic, cultural, and other dimensions, and may even be a combination of any of them, depending on the nature and objectives of a particular transnational engagement.

One form of transnational engagement that has relatively recently become a feature of migration is transnational education (TNE). Defined as an activity where "learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (UNESCO/ Council of Europe, 2001), various studies claim that demand for TNE will increase by 2020 (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001). Knight (2002, Cited in Huang, 2007) refers to transnational education as the act of actual and online to-ing and fro-ing of the learners, facilitators, knowledge, and academic plans involving more than one country. This is not, of course, absolutely a new phenomenon, as people are known to have traversed national borders and territories in pursuit of higher education from as early as mid-19th century (See Huang, 2007). One of the things that makes TNE an interesting field to explore at the height of globalization and in the midst of migratory movements is the fact that engagement in TNE has allowed migrants to examine their own identity (re)formation within the transnational and migratory social space and explore how their choice of cross-border pursuits impinges on their practice of their own agency. Such is the case of the four chosen Bangkok-based teachers whose demographic profiles were coded and established. Among the four, two were chosen for a life narratives analysis and ethnographic observation supplemented by their social network textual and photographic posts.

One of the emerging transnational activities that a growing number of migrants are engaged in includes enrolling in graduate school programs. At the time of writing, the actual number of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) currently living in the Kingdom of Siam could not be used to justify a claim that they possessed a diasporic trait as opposed to the Filipino migrants' population in top work destinations such as the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Taiwan, Bahrain, and Canada (See Commission on Overseas Filipinos. (December 2010). Correspondingly, the number of Filipino migrant workers pursuing graduate studies could not be claimed either to be quantitatively significant so as to arrive at conclusive and determinate findings. For example, although the enrollment rate ballooned from the first time Filipino migrants were known to have enrolled, the first batch of students from a transnational program whose face-to-face sessions were held in Bangkok and whose MOODLE-supported activities were facilitated from the Philippines was only composed of ten students. This pioneering study, however, argues that despite the smallness of the actual number of Filipino migrant workers involved in TNE at the time of writing, their life stories provide a window into the world of other Bangkok-based Filipino migrants whose transnational activities create an impact on their practice of their own agency and on their identity formation/ reformation as overseas workers.

Methodology

The data in this investigation were collected from a survey questionnaire, interviews and ethnographic observations of Bangkok-based migrant workers and their transnational education engagements. Aside from the survey questionnaire that allowed the author to collect demographic information from and about the respondents, the author used analysis of life narratives "in addressing questions of meaning and causality" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 10). This qualitative dimension constituted the major design of this research as it offered "the strategic significance of context, and of particular, in the development of our understandings and explanations of the social world" and that inherent in it was the "unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts" (Mason, 2006, p. 1). The ethnographic observation focused on two Filipino migrant workers whose life narratives offered the author sufficient data to analyze. It took six to ten months to cull the first informant's Facebook data and roughly 36 months to cull the second informant's. Over-all, the data used by the author involved a mixture of actual interactions and conversations with said migrant workers. The use of Facebook as a source of information was done to check on the informants' other relevant experiences not mentioned in the interviews and whether they were consistent with or discrepant from their interview responses. The strength of this study's ethnographic observation using Facebook lay on its ability to provide relevant information placing importance on how people's daily routines and social practices are embedded in new media, using it not as a substitute to actual events, but as a form of reinforcement (Morris, 2012).

This study highlights the case of four (4) Bangkok-based Filipino migrantworkers as their status and transnational engagements, specifically their participation in transnational education, matched the criteria set for this study. All the four informants pursued graduate studies transnationally within the last two to three years. Michael, Robert, and Joan (not their real names) all enrolled in a transnational educational program whose degree-awarding institution was based in the Philippines and had a tie-up with a local institution in Bangkok. Tony (not his real name), on the other hand,

obtained his Master of Arts degree from a Philippine-based educational institution whose program was largely facilitated by the use of the Internet. Three (3) of the respondents were male among whom the youngest was within the 26 to 30 years old age bracket and the oldest from the 41 to 45 years old age bracket. Joan, the sole female respondent fell under the 36 to 40 years old age bracket. Three of them were married, whereas Albert was single. Michael and Robert earned a monthly income ranging from THB20,001 to THB30,000 while Joan and Tony had a monthly income ranging from THB30,001 to THB40,000 each. Aside from Robert who was teaching adult learners on a freelance set-up, Michael, Joan and Tony were all teaching full-time in elementary (*prathom*) and high school (*mattayom*) levels. In addition, with Robert being the only one whose stay in Thailand ranged from one to five years as an OFW, Michael, Joan and Tony all had been in the Kingdom from six (6) to ten (10) years. At the time of the interview, Tony was enrolled in the Doctor of Education Program, Michael was still working on his MA, whereas Robert and Joan already finished their studies.

Among these four (4) migrant workers, the author elected to write vignettes on two respondents on the basis of her familiarity with them and her access to their transnational engagement-related information. The first vignette focused on Joan, a Bangkok-based mother-of-two teacher. Joan and the author first met in an evangelical church where both of them went on Sundays. Joan recently obtained her MA in Education with a major in English through a Bangkok-based educational organization with a Philippine-based partner as the award-giving institution. The second vignette concentrated on Tony. Tony was the author's children's teacher who had also previously enjoyed transnational schooling in the master's level. At the time of writing, Tony was teaching in an international school in Bangkok and was working on Educational Management as his specialization in the doctorate level. For his current transnational engagement, Tony was enrolled in the same Philippine-based educational institution he earlier went to.

As mentioned earlier, what this study highlights is not the quantitative strength based on the number of the informants, given the fact that the base number of Filipino migrants involved in the first Bangkok-based TNE program spearheaded by a Philippine university was inherently small. In addition, this paper does not aim to obtain data for a comparative study, for which a big number of participants requires. Neither does this study aim to establish frequency distribution. What this paper seeks to do is explore the range of the informants' responses and provide explanation that would have otherwise been difficult to establish quantitatively.

There were three stages of coding that were observed. Employing the recursive method of analyzing the collected data, the author first analyzed survey information that was demographic in nature. This first stage of coding involved an analysis of primary research data on the following themes: participants' identities, work monetary compensation, occupational status, professional roles, and educational background. For Stage Two coding, the author made a cross-narrative analysis of the key research themes. At this stage, the informants' responses to key-theme questions were explored, namely, how their varying transnational educational engagements synced with their identity formation as migrants and how it linked with their practice of their own agency. The third stage involved coding of two chosen informants' Facebook posts facilitated by the author's ethnographic observation. Stage Three

coding only included two (2) out of the four (4) who were interviewed because their interview responses indicated the strongest indications of the key themes underscored in this study. The last two stages involved data analysis, particularly Findings and Interpretation (Stage Four) and Conclusions and Recommendations (Stage Five).

Teacher Vignettes on the Migrants' Identity-Formation and Practice of Agency

Vignette 1: Transnational Education, a Source of Pride

Joan's Practice of Personal Agency

Joan was a migrant worker whose OFW experience ranged from six (6) to ten (10) years. Practically, Joan could no longer be considered an inexperienced overseas employee. This could be attested not only by her number of years of stay outside her homeland, but also by her monthly income. Earning a monthly salary from a range of THB30,001 to THB40,000, Joan could easily pass as a senior teacher. An interview with a Foreign Department Officer personally handling the hiring of foreign teachers in Thai private school revealed that at the time of writing, the standard entry salary rate given to Filipino teachers in a typical private Thai school could go as low as THB10,000 per month to a relatively higher rate of THB15,000 as opposed to the standard entry salary rate of THB30,000 per month given to any Caucasian teacher regardless of the latter's educational attainment (Coronica, S., 24 September 2013; See also www.ajarn.com). With this current salary-giving practice in Thailand, Joan's income can be said to be better off than others. What made Joan stand out among those who participated in this study was her characteristic views impacting on her practice of her own agency and correlating to her own identity formation as a migrant worker.

When asked to describe how her own control of things around her influenced her to pursue graduate studies via transnational education, Joan revealed,

It gave me confidence to teach as I knew that the course would equip me. It assured me of the possibility of obtaining a teaching license....I did expect to gain promotion and [salary] increment plus more knowledge in teaching strategies and proven classroom management techniques from well-experienced professors. (14 September 2013)

As a self-governing social actor within the migrant social space, Joan ultimately bolstered her understanding and conduct of her own decisions. Although she cited the promise of a Thai teaching license, promotion and salary increase as her instrumental motivation, it did not eclipse the fact that her autonomy was at work, making her become a better worker, knowledgeable of teaching strategies and other pedagogic techniques. Clearly, Joan's decision demonstrated how her personal agency moved her to go beyond the financial and employment-related returns which the structure/society she was in had a control over. By having done so, Joan did not just comply with both her work and immigration requirements to secure her migration status, but she also saw transnational education as a means not only to address mobility issues, but more importantly to benefit from them instead.

Joan's Identity Formation vis-à-vis Transplantation of Nationalism

It has to be noted further that Joan's active use of her own agency did not stop there. Having recognized the power of her own choices, Joan also saw the importance of her transnational education as an instrument leading to the formation and reformation of

her identity as a migrant worker. When asked how finishing her transnationally obtained degree would affect her identity as an OFW, Joan confirmed:

Finishing another degree has positive effects on me. Working with a sense of accomplishment improved my work attitudes (sic) and habits which were noticed by my employer. Being regularly commended for excellent performance made a good impression on Filipinos in general, which is why my employer prefers hiring Filipino teachers....

Being a transnational student is a mixture of advantages and disadvantages. Tuition fees are four times the fees in the Philippines. However, once finished, [it] brings sense of pride and another milestone in my career. (14 September 2013)

Using her ability to steer the situation to her advantage reflected how engaging in transnational education could be a way for Joan to construct and reconstruct her habits and work practices that eventually helped enhance her image as a migrant worker. Joan not only saw how transnational education could become her conduit to making personal and professional progress, but also how it could be a channel through which Filipino migrant work could help in bringing honor to her country by virtue of one's commendable work performance. This study then argues that Joan's engagement in transnational education did not only have an effect on her full practice of her own agency and identity formation within the migrant workspace. This study asserts that transnational education can, at the same time, be a medium through which a migrant worker can transplant her own sense of nationalism and see it work even within the host-country setting. With Joan's assertion that through her own example her employers were convinced to hire other Filipino teachers, she exemplified how cross-education could also indirectly facilitate migrants' modernist perspective of nationalism expressed within the structural conditions of modern transnational society which, in this case, was within the complex organizational contexts of 21st century migrant life.

Vignette 2: The Future Migrant-Returnee

Practice of Personal Agency towards a Long-term Goal

Single and in his late thirties, Tony taught in an international school where the author's children studied. In fact, he became their teacher at some point. That was how this author met and knew about him. They had also previously worked together for a charity concert the author organized. As a subject coordinator, Tony was earning a monthly income that ranged between THB30, 001 to THB40, 000. He had been away from the Philippines for six (6) to ten (10) years, enough to say that he was not a novice in the migrant workforce at the time of the interview. Unlike the other informants in this study, Tony's engagement in transnational education started from the master's and continued on to the doctorate level. Although Tony's study set-up was a bit similar to Joan's—that is, Tony also had a combination of online and face-to-face sessions—he had to go back home to the Philippines to meet his teachers/advisers personally. This was because Tony's degree-awarding institution never had a local partner in Bangkok, Thailand.

Questions about Tony's practice of his own agency revealed that, unlike Joan, his decision to pursue his studies was mainly driven by his own plan to go back home for good. Knowing that employment in the homeland would necessitate higher educational attainment, should a teacher apply for managerial or supervisory positions, Tony took it upon himself to engage in cross-border education. In this

regard, Tony's motivation was different from Joan's as reflected in his statement below:

I decided to continue my studies because I am planning to go back to the Philippines and I wanted to be in the managerial or supervisory position. Having the Ed. D. [Doctor in Education] is a plus factor in applying for that position. (18 September 2013)

Additionally, because of Tony's bachelor's degree in education, he was not exactly required by his employer to take up graduate studies in said field if only to comply with the Thai Ministry of Education's mandatory qualifications in order to be given the Thai teaching license. This was also one of the marked differences between him and the other informants in this study. Having said this, Tony's decision to study transnationally was not, in any way, determined by his host-country's structural conditions but by his own country. Although this initially came out as the main difference between him and Joan, in a sense, it was also what made their conditions the same. Both working within a state's complex organizational directives which compelled them to act upon the situation, Tony, just like Joan, regarded education as an "internationally tradeable service" (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001, p. 86) specifically treating it "As a private good... [that] provides economic benefits and personal satisfaction for the student/ graduate" (p. 86). It can be learned that Tony's participation in transnational education, from the master's to the doctorate levels, had been recorded via his Facebook status updates and other posts from middle of October 2010 up to this writing.

When asked about how his own control of things helped him in his decision to study transnationally, Tony further demonstrated his capacity to act freely within the migrant work sphere:

With my present earning/ income, I can afford to send myself to school. Also, in the online program, the school gives me the tasks which I need to complete in a given time frame. With this set-up, it allows me to work at the same time do my studies. (18 September 2013)

Tony's concept of his own agency was driven by his financial freedom. He utilized this to enable him to make a directed action of not only securing his employment—seeing to it that his monetary needs were addressed, but also of managing his transnational education which, in the first place, was sustained by his own job. As a migrant worker, Tony recognized his power over his present migrant condition and believed that he could change his future by making decisions and enacting on them.

Like Joan, Tony saw his image and the formation of his OFW identity to have been positively influenced by his transnational education. When asked how finishing a degree obtained through cross-border learning would possibly alter his image as a migrant worker, Tony replied:

I can use my knowledge to further improve my performance at work. It does change my understanding of myself. I gain more respect and get promoted. Along with the promotion is a bigger responsibility.

This online education really helps those like me who want to pursue higher studies without leaving our work. In terms of financial [needs] such as tuition fee and other fees we need for the completion of the course, we could manage it because we still have work and earn at the same. Even the completion of the requirements is easier because I can complete the tasks assigned during my free time using all the available resources I have. (18 September 2013)

Tony realized, just like Joan, that transnational education was a significant medium giving him the opportunity to become a better employee. He also thought that becoming a better employee meant not only gaining respect from others around him, but also getting financially rewarded in the form of a job promotion. It has to be noted that at the time of the interview, Tony held the position of a subject coordinator. Apart from Tony's changing migrant-to-entrepreneur-identity mentioned earlier, he also acknowledged that gaining respect and being promoted inevitably came with a growing responsibility. In this vein, Tony's identity formation can be said to have become more complex as initially imagined.

Conclusion

With the growing interconnection between migration and education, it is not surprising to learn about the forecasts made by different studies claiming the increase in demand for transnational education in 2020. Given these projections, it is crucial that all stakeholders look into the many areas in anticipation of possible consequences such development may bring. While this study does not claim to posit conclusive findings linked to TNE-related issues, it hopes to offer the following observations in an effort to add to the growing body of relevant literature:

That engaging in TNE among migrant workers may not be limited to pure representations of personal and professional relationships, but one that may possibly determine economic growth;

That a migrant's agency within the transnational context allows him/ her not only to comply with employment and immigrations requirements, but more importantly to advance one's self;

That TNE can be a channel through which a migrant worker can construct/ reconstruct his/ her identity within the transnational social space;

That by banking on the benefits TNE offers, a migrant can transplant his/ her own sense of nationalism even within the host-country employment sphere;

That articulation of a migrant's religious faith can blend well with expressions of his/ her TNE activities;

That a migrant's online activities supplement rather than replace offline tasks, and;

That TNE can facilitate raising a migrant's level of awareness on how he/she can regulate the opportunities around him, both within the receiving-country setting and the homeland.

References

Castles, S. & Miller, M. (2009). *The age of migration: International popular movements in the modern world*. NY/ London: The Guilford Press.

Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. Great Britain: SAGE Publications Ltd.

McBurnie, G. & Ziguras, C. (2001). The regulation of transnational higher education in Southeast Asia: Case studies of Hong Kong, Malaysia and Australia. *Higher Education*, 42, 85-105.

Mason, J. (2006). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). Great Britain: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Morris, J. (2012). Learning How to Shoot Fish on the Internet: New Media in the Russian Margins as Facilitating Immediate and Parochial Social Needs. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(8), 1546-1564.

Commission on Overseas Filipinos. (December 2010). *Stock estimate of overseas Filipinos*. Philippines.

UNESCO & Council of Europe. (2001). *The UNESCO-CEPES/ Council of Europe code of good practice for the provision of transnational education*. Paris: Europe.

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. London/ NY: Routledge.

