Southeast Asian Trajectories of Labour Mobility: Precarity, Translocality, and Resilience

Oliver **Tappe**[1] and Minh T.N. **Nguyen**[2]

Abstract

Within and across Southeast Asian national borders, there has been a growing circulation of labour, capital, people, and goods. Meanwhile, urbanisation, agrarian changes, and liberal economic restructuring have been drawing a large section of the rural population into mobile economies and trade networks. This special issue explores the linkage between mobility and the growing precaritisation of labour resulting from neoliberalised development policies, nationalist citizenship regimes, and discourses, and arbitrary state power. Arguably, the consequent insecurity and uncertainty have profound implications for the social and economic life of migrant labourers. Although these conditions engender dangers and risks, they also hold possibilities for crafting translocal livelihoods and social relations. In this introduction, we investigate the diverse trajectories of labour migration in Southeast Asia through a critical discussion on the concept of 'precarity' that underscores the resilience of labour migrants despite the precarious conditions of their lives. The special issue suggests that, while precarious labour has long been part of regimes of control and exploitation in the region, precarity today is shaped by the blurry boundaries between the legal and the illegal, between local and global lives, and between different worlds of belonging.

KEYWORDS: Labour Migration, Mobility, Precarity, Resilience, Translocality

INTRODUCTION

"THIS KIND OF LIFE is very precarious. Sometimes you are lucky and you can make a good deal, but, things are very certain and anything can happen anytime. We just have to take each day as it comes," said a migrant waste trader in Hanoi to one of the authors. Her statement aptly portrays the sense of living amidst uncertainty and insecurity shared by many people on the move in Southeast Asia today. Throughout the region and beyond, labour migrants take great risks to make a living; their trajectories of mobility reveal daily encounters with complex webs of power and life-worlds that are in-between, hybrid, and evolving. As Pattana Kitiarsa reflects on the Thai-Isan transnational migrant

[1]University of Hamburg and University of Cologne, Germany; otappe@uni-koeln.de
[1]Social Anthropology, Bielefeld University, Germany; thiminh@gmail.com

labourers in Singapore, life is seen as *lakhon chiwit* (real-life drama), full of dramatic episodes of suffering and happiness (Kitiarsa 2014: 131).

This special issue sheds new light on the everyday lives of labour migrants in Southeast Asia through critical engagement with the concept of precarity that underscores their resilience despite the precarious conditions of their lives. Originally employed to analyse the unfolding of neoliberal restructuring in post-industrial settings, precarity has begun to feature more frequently in discussions of privatisation and labour relations in Asia (see for example Hewison and Kalleberg 2012; Piper *et al*. 2016). Our contribution to this literature lies in its attention to the social ambivalence and moral ambiguities arising from people's diverse ways of living migrant lives in Southeast Asia today. We argue that such ambivalence and ambiguities constitute people's translocal life-worlds, their sense of self and belonging, and their social relations, which in turn generate the particular dynamics of precarity in the region. In our contribution, a translocal perspective makes it possible to account for everyday negotiations and tactics, even as it recognises the challenges faced by labour migrants when making a living and building a life while on the move. We use the term 'translocal/translocality' in its broadest sense encompassing all the practices and social institutions that form a bridge across locations and spaces, regardless of whether these are within or across national borders (Nguyen 2014; Oakes and Schein 2006).

Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic world regions today. Growing movement and circulation of labour, capital, people, and goods intersect its national borders, especially because of regional treaties that facilitate cross-border mobility and trade. Meanwhile, urbanisation, agrarian changes, and liberal economic restructuring in the region have been drawing a large section of the rural population into mobile economies and trade networks – entailing translocal life-worlds across and within national borders. Scholarship on labour migration in Southeast Asia has examined how mobility feeds into household organisation and local livelihoods, gender and social relations, and the broader dynamics of the societies involved (Kelly 2011; Nguyen 2014; Rigg and Salamanca 2011).

This research, however, has paid less attention to the ways in which migration engenders hybrid social forms and how regional and national boundaries shift along with people's practices of belonging and citizenship across locations and places. Also, little explored is the linkage between contemporary mobility and the growing precaritisation of labour that results from neoliberalised development policies, nationalist citizenship regimes, and arbitrary state power (but see Pye *et al*. 2012). Arguably, these underlying processes have profound implications for the social and economic life of migrants, spawning dangers and risks, but at the same time holding possibilities for them to pursue livelihoods and sustain social relations.

The contributions to this special issue address this dialectic through cases of rural-urban migrants in Vietnam and Indonesia, colonial indentured labourers in

French Indochina, and transborder migrants from poor and conflict-ridden Myanmar to prosperous Thailand. Together, they show patterns of translocal labour mobility that are characterised by uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability on the one hand, and resilience, creativity, and sociality on the other. Precarious labour and precarious lives have long been part of historical regimes of labour control and exploitation in the region, with labour mobility often signalling regional disparities and local patterns of dispossession, marginalisation, and violence. In equal measure, however, social relations and networks can be forged in the context of precarious labour while labour mobility potentially remakes relations of power and support, personhood, and citizenship (Nguyen and Locke 2014; Salazar and Glick-Schiller 2014). In contrast to post-industrial contexts, the precarity in the lives of Southeast Asian labour migrants is shaped by the blurred boundaries between the legal and the illegal, between local and global lives, and between different worlds of belonging.

WHITHER PRECARITY? CONTEXTUALISING AND TEMPORALISING A FASHIONABLE CONCEPT

The discussion of precariousness dates back to Karl Marx's conception of a reserve army of labour as a precondition for capitalist development and proletarianisation – "a floating and stagnant army of surplus labour that is absorbed when, where and as needed for the expansion of capital" (Delgado-Wise and Veltmeyer 2016: 45–46; see as well Jonna and Foster 2016; Seymour 2012; van der Linden and Roth 2014). Today, cross-border and internal migration within the Global South entails much of the insecure labour relations that characterise the surplus labour forces of early capitalism (Ferguson 2015; Li 2010). What differs in Southeast Asia nowadays is the fact that it is becoming a new frontier of industrial production in which national governments are seeking to attract global capital through labour and citizenship policies that keep migrant labour precarious for the sake of capitalist expansion (see for instance Arnold and Pickles 2011).

There exist various definitions of precarity, most of which address an existence below historically and culturally acceptable norms of livelihoods and social protection. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2014), originally the term meant a precarious tenancy "at the will of" the landholder, with no promise of security or permanence. Precarity – from the Latin *precarius* – signifies "a life without the promise of stability" (Tsing 2015: 3), or a life lived in "someone else's hands" (Berlant 2011: 192). In the context of neoliberal restructuring in post-industrial societies, precarity is used to describe the growing dominance of temporary, flexible, and insecure labour relations in a post-Fordist era and the erosion of the social welfare state (Allison 2013; Han 2018; Hardt and Negri 2005; Lorey 2015; Molé 2012; Standing 2011). A precarious present is

constructed to contrast with a past that appears as a stable horizon of expectations as the basis of a "relatively predictable futurity of which people in many parts of the world now feel dispossessed" (Muehlebach 2013: 297). As a result, people suffer from a "sense of unease, uncertainty, and a darkness about the present in a state of not becoming a future," argues Anne Allison in her study of post-industrial restructuring in Japan (2013: 346).

In the Global South, however, precarious – insecure and unstable – work relations without institutionalised worker protection have historically been the norm (Hewison and Kalleberg 2012: 398; Munck 2013: 752). Pierre Bourdieu in his early work on colonial Algeria used the term *precarité* to describe the working conditions of Algerian casual workers (in contrast to permanent ones) and linked it with Karl Marx's analysis of the reserve army of labour (see Bourdieu 1963; Waite 2009). Here, precarity portrays work relations that rank below what is conceived as 'decent work' (according to ILO definitions) in a particular socio-cultural and historical context. In their discussion of precarious employment relations in Southeast Asia, Kevin Hewison and Arne L. Kalleberg (2012) show how neoliberal tendencies of flexibilisation further undermine an already fragile working class in countries wherein trade unions are weak and social protection is low.

The papers in this special issue examine the mobility of migrants who operate at the interstices of national and regional economies and labour markets. They suggest that while the precarious conditions of migrant life and work are anxiety producing, labour migration offers opportunities for improving livelihoods and sustaining social life. Unlike in post-industrial settings, precarity in this region has long been perceived as a political reality to be engaged with rather than a loss of (imagined) security to grieve about. Out of this positioning arise particular spaces of action: in some instances, people actively seek temporary and flexible labour arrangements (Balčaitė, this issue; Gruß, this issue; Nooteboom, this issue), in others, people engage in legally and morally ambiguous practices for the sake of livelihoods, citizenship, and belonging (Balčaitė, this issue; Nguyen, this issue). The risks and uncertainties of translocal lives notwithstanding, they even dare to hope for a better life. This, we argue, results from a long history of living with precarity in which people have developed ways to respond to the structural forces that produce this condition. This becomes clearer when the everyday tactics of colonial indentured workers are juxtaposed with those of present-day transnational or internal labour migrants (Alipio, this issue; Tappe, this issue).

The historical perspective allows us to see that precarity has been intrinsic to capitalist accumulation in Southeast Asia, past and present, although its forms and mechanisms have shifted to display a greater role of regional states. The experiences of labour migrants as citizens and non-citizens in the contexts we study point to the co-production of precarity by state and global capital in the guise of neoliberal restructuring. As Piper *et al*. point out, "the exploitation of

migrant labour has become systemic, entailing generalizable conditions of uncertainty, disempowerment, vulnerability and insufficiency" (Piper *et al*. 2016: 3). That said, a more nuanced picture of labour relations also suggests possibilities for emerging intra-class hierarchies and, eventually, new solidarities (de Neve 2001; Sanchez and Strümpell 2014).

These emerging social forms have been foregrounded by the existing literature on translocality (see Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013; Nguyen and Locke 2014; Oakes and Schein 2006; Peth *et al*. 2018). Translocal mobility potentially alleviates *and* engenders precarity. A translocal perspective can thus be productive for identifying the interplay between precarity and resilience in migrant lives against the backdrop of institutional processes that link their places of origin and host societies.

THE *LONGUE DURÉE* OF PRECARIOUS LABOUR: ACCUMULATION BY PRECARITISATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The history of bonded labour in Southeast Asia features long periods in which slavery, debt servitude, and *corvée* labour were the norm in regional movements of labour (Derks 2010; Reid 1983; Stanziani 2014; Tappe and Lindner 2016). The expansion of global capitalism in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and its corresponding needs of labour accumulation and control, fostered voluntary and/or coerced mobility, both of which involved precarious labour conditions. Thousands of Asian indentured labourers, the 'coolies', were moved around the globe under often inhuman conditions to replace slave labour after the abolition of slavery (Allen 2014; Meagher 2008; Northrup 1995). Such exploitative labour relations and global infrastructures of violence clearly demonstrate continuities with colonial slavery (Breman 1989; van der Linden and Rodríguez García 2016; Zeuske 2015) and premodern forms of bonded servitude (Behal and van der Linden 2006; Bush 2000; Klein 1993).

Labour-intensive economies such as the rubber plantations of Sumatra and southern Indochina entailed various movements of people and different systems of labour organisation and control. This led to variegated patterns of labour relations where 'traditional' systems of slavery and servitude and variants of casual wage labour co-existed (Campbell 2004; Reid 1983). At the height of imperialism, which laid the foundation for the global capitalist economy, mechanisms of indentured 'coolie' labour became instrumental to mobilise and control labour (Varma 2016).

'Coolie' labour arrangements varied from casual labour to formal contracts, but even contracted labourers were prone to exploitation, legal insecurity and violence, not least due to the power inequalities inherent to colonial indenture, and racialised models of labour organisation (Aso 2018; Sturman 2014; Tappe 2016). They appear to be prototypes for Southeast Asian translocal labour

mobility today, especially in the case of (state or non-state) organised contract labour: the realisation of contracted relations is often similarly subjected to power hierarchies (see, for example, Huong 2010; |Killias 2010, 2018; Yea 2017). In particular, weak legal protection and citizenship rights tend to translate into arbitrary violence, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment.

The apparently free labour relations in Southeast Asia today continue to be shaped by varied forms of "unfreedom" in different contexts (Derks 2010: 841). Migrant labour relations are characterised by varying degrees of coercion and vulnerability reminiscent of mechanisms experienced by colonial migrant labourers. For example, similar patterns of debt bondage occur in colonial systems of indenture and present-day contract labour regimes, accounting for varying degrees of bondedness and unfreedom of contract labour (Bush 2000; Maurer 2010; Platt *et al.* 2017). In both colonial and contemporary Southeast Asian labour relations, labour mobility and precarity have often gone hand in hand to meet the needs of the capitalist demand for a flexible, disposable workforce.

This long history of precarious labour continues to shape labour mobility in the region, taking people to new places and helping them establish new connections to the global and regional economy. In the special issue, Oliver Tappe explores historical patterns of Vietnamese labour mobility, contrasting the contemporary movement of Vietnamese rural migrants to upland Laos with the coolie labour migration to the Pacific islands of Nouvelle-Calédonie. Drawing on Andrew Hardy's (2003) seminal *longue durée* study of Vietnamese migration dynamics, Tappe traces these historical patterns to the present-day dynamics of Vietnamese labour migration to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. He argues that colonial coolies and today's labour migrants from Vietnam share a translocal existence of an extended household economy directed at reproducing the patrilineage, marked by shifting gender relations and generational conflicts. Faced with a precarious life both in their place of origin and abroad, Vietnamese labour migrants today have over time created viable translocal networks that help them minimise the risks of exploitation that marked previous coolie existences.

The Philippines constitute another prominent case for considering the historical continuities of precarious labour. Already in the early twentieth century, labourers from the archipelago were recruited to the sugar and pineapple plantations in Hawaii. During the Second Indochina War, the United States of America hired Filipino contract workers to work on construction sites in Vietnam and Thailand. In the 1970s, President Marcos established a system of state-orchestrated systematic recruitment and export of labour for profit and development maximisation (Guevarra 2010; Rodriguez 2010). In this historical context, Cheryll Alipio's discussion of the emergence of the so-called OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) shows that post-colonial labour mobility displays characteristics of colonial labour mobilisation and control while also showing the

increased power of both state and non-state actors. Yet, as Alipio shows, the very regimes of control that are responsible for the precaritisation of labour mobility by the OFW are also challenged by the global networks and alliances that have emerged in response to their experiences of abuse and exploitation.

Precarity often hinges on relations of dependency, albeit deeply ambiguous situations in which the migrant worker is dependent on various actors, from employers, police, and moneylenders to middlemen. Despite the hazards of exploitation and coercion, however, this dependency might also imply a sense of security due to patron-client obligations, forms of patronage that afford bondedness and inclusion, in contrast to the 'freedom' of social outsiders (Derks 2010: 850). As has been argued elsewhere, patronage is sometimes the only social resource that people possess to secure livelihoods and protection where insecurity is the norm (Ansell 2015; Ferguson 2015). This mixture of security and insecurity explains the ambivalence in people's interpretation of dependency relations that might be cast as exploitative by scholars.

As such, Southeast Asian labour mobility has always been induced by powerful forces, not unlike other global contexts. Yet, even as the rural poor signed the contract to become a coolie on the colonial rubber plantations in French Indochina, they often did so viewing it as an opportunity to overcome the hardships and insecurities of peasant life (Alipio, this issue; Aso 2018; Tappe, this issue; Tully 2011). Theirs were more often than not stories of living precarious lives in the hope of building better lives. This is also true for labour migrants today, be they contract workers in the ASEAN care sector (see Hochschild 2000; Huong 2010; Piper *et al*. 2016), or rural migrants occupying marginalised economic niches such as waste trade in Vietnam, or Burmese migrant labourers illicitly staffing Thailand's plantations, services, and factories (Balčaitė, this issue; Gruß, this issue; Nguyen 2018; Nguyen, this issue). Out of this long history of living precarious lives on the move, we argue, people in the region have crafted diverse everyday tactics to negotiate uncertainty and power tin pursuit of their aspirations for better futures.

PRECARITY AS A TEXTURE OF CONTEMPORARY TRANSLOCAL LIVES

In Southeast Asia today, precarity permeates the texture of translocal lives. It has ramifications in the various domains shaping these lives, namely economic, legal, and affective ones. Precarity-producing processes implicate both people's economic activities and the citizenship regimes that regulate their mobility and rights; the effects of these processes spill over to the private lives they are leading across locations and spaces. They infringe on their sense of belonging, social relations, moral orientations, and subjectivities, even taking a toll on their bodies on the move.

Examples abound (see for instance Johnson 2012; Piper *et al.* 2016; Pye *et al.* 2012). Transnational labour migrants often constitute the lowest strata in the labour hierarchy; both their low status and their experiences with exploitation often are the result of their precarious legal situation (Balčaitė, this issue; Derks 2013; Eberle and Holliday 2011). Undocumented migrant workers usually do not dare to inform the authorities in case of abuse as they lack basic legal protection. As Indrė Balčaitė shows in the case of Karen migrants from Myanmar to Thailand (this issue), even when they hold documentation, discrimination and problems of recognition lead to *de-facto* statelessness. Scared of detention and looming 'deportability' (de Genova 2002), they endure violence, sexual harassment, withheld payments, work insecurity, and restricted freedom of movement. Inga Gruß (this issue) suggests that such fears are so pervasive in daily migrant lives that many seek to manage their bodily appearance in such a way that it does not attract attention to their ethnic identity in a society that considers it inferior and out of place.

Legal precarity often corresponds with violence. While colonial history informs us about countless instances of institutionalised (and usually racialised) violence against coolie labourers (Jennings 2011; Tappe, this issue; Tully 2011), labour migrants today also experience arbitrary violence by the police and other state actors. Alluding to Giorgio Agamben (1998)'s notion of the 'bare life', Pattana Kitiarsa argues that transnational migrants "[…] are stripped bare of the powerful sociocultural, economic, and legal processes that govern their existence at home and govern the citizens of the host countries" (2014: 3–4).

Cheryll Alipio (this issue) presents the famous case of Flor Contemplacion, a Philippine domestic helper in Singapore who in 1995 was accused of murder and executed without any legal counsel (see also Hilsdon 2000). Flor Contemplacion became a 'martyr' of the OPWs and remains until today an emblem of the precarious, mobile workforce in the Global South; her case attests to the arbitrariness of state power in dealing with migrant labourers.

Gruß's case study illustrates how Burmese migrants are under constant surveillance, while Minh Nguyen describes how negotiations with the police are the everyday staple of Vietnamese migrant waste traders. In Balčaitė's account, Karen migrants experience restrictions on their movement and employment due to the Thai bureaucratic procedures that do not recognise their rights. However, the author also gives us examples of Karen migrants who successfully navigate the Thai legal system and, in many cases, are able to turn statelessness to trans-border citizenship, not unlike how the migrants studied by Kitiarsa (2014) attempt to re-craft selfhood and identity even in the face of violence and death.

In the same vein, Oliver Tappe (this issue) shows that Vietnamese workers in Laos take advantage of tourist visas to carry out their work illicitly. They can never be certain about long-term residence in Laos – which produces emotional stress for migrant families – and neither can they expect legal protection from Lao authorities. Dealing with this legal situation therefore requires skills in

interacting with Lao actors within the state bureaucracy. However, unlike the Karen migrants in Balčaitė's study, Vietnamese migrants in Laos feel more confident in navigating the diffuse space of Lao labour legislations – not least because hailing from a socialist 'brother country' eventually gives them a certain degree of protection.

The metaphor of bare life might be a little overstretched to apply to the contexts we study; yet it provides a useful foil for Gruß's (this issue) insightful discussion of migrant invisibility. She shows how migrants from Myanmar in Thailand operate at the intersection between the invisibility imposed on them by transnational processes and the invisibility they themselves strategically evoke out of their social positioning. To stay invisible means submerging one's own identity, but it also affords a certain degree of freedom with which one can move about and mind one's own business without being noticed. This double edge of invisibility is commonly experienced and deployed by many labour migrants across Southeast Asia.

In her contribution to this issue, Alipio asks: Who profits and who is indebted from precarious configurations of labour mobility in Southeast Asia? What becomes clear from our contributions is that while precarity functions to generate profits for corporations and states, it also creates particular kinds of spaces for translocal livelihoods. These spaces are latently productive for the economic and social life of families, communities, and even regions, but are simultaneously inhabited by patronage networks characterised by unequal power relations between genders, generations, and social ranks (see also Huijsmans 2014; Meghani 2016). Taken together, our special issue suggests that precarity reverberates between the migrants' life on the move and the economic and social life of their families wherever they are. Yet, they also point to the resilience of translocal households and the flexibility with which people build their lives in the face of precarity.

Gerben Nooteboom's (this issue) case of Javanese seasonal workers suggests the ways in which families rearrange the gendered division of labour and care according to the cycles of labour migration, in ways similar to those of the migrant waste traders that Minh Nguyen studies in northern Vietnam (see also Nguyen 2014). In a similar vein, young Vietnamese endure the risky work on Laos' construction sites to buy a plot of land at home to start a family, while Lao adolescents fill the sweatshops of Thailand's textile industry to support their families in Laos (Molland 2017; Tappe, this issue). This is reminiscent of the historical examples of the colonial 'coolie' contract workers and the Khmu seasonal labourers on nineteenth-century Siam's teak plantations who sacrificed a few years of their life accumulating enough wealth to pay the bride price back in the hills of northern Laos (Évrard 2006).

Examples from the Myanmar-Thailand context further demonstrate the double face of precarity that large parts of the displaced population of Myanmar experience today and the tactics and alliances that migrants deploy

to pursue their hopes for a better life. Despite their precarious citizenship, Balčaitė's Karen informants persist in sustaining translocal life-worlds that are woven out of migrant networks, knowledge exchanges, and shared experiences of poverty, violence, and uncertain futures. Balčaitė, along with Gruß, suggests that these translocal life-worlds can be understood only in the context of the kinship and social ties people have with their communities and regions of origin.

A translocal perspective, therefore, is productive for understanding precarity as permeating both the world of (migrant) work and the world of home and communal lives (see Huijsmans 2014; Nguyen 2014). It helps us get a better view not only of the possibilities but also of the trade-offs and compromises that people are confronted with when on the move. Although households/families may benefit from their members' migrant endeavours, they are malleable to conflict, tension, and distress, even disintegration (Alipio, this issue; Nooteboom, this issue). The social dislocations at times are passed down generations. In the biographies of transnational labour migrants' families that Alipio (this issue) vividly describes, the children can be at once potential beneficiaries and traumatised victims of translocal family lives (see also Hoang and Yeoh 2015).

New gender and generational dynamics might add to the general climate of social and moral uncertainty for migrants and their families (Horat 2017; Nguyen 2018). In her discussion of Burmese migrants' tactics of invisibility, Gruß indicates that, when critically assessing young women changing from wearing 'traditional' Burmese dress for 'modern' Thai-style clothes, elderly people, mostly men, resent the mimetic transformation of allegedly ethnic customs. Tendencies towards assimilation might cast doubts about a future return to the homeland, severing translocal ties and breaking with the past, but at the same time it entails a new idea of identity or personhood. Herein lies one of the dilemmas of translocal lives: different ideas of belonging and futurity create tension and conflicts between generations and gender. Meanwhile, new forms of labour division and the corresponding generational and gendered patterns of mobility entail anxieties, at times even individual disillusionment. While in many cases, young female migrants appear the most vulnerable (Kabmanivanh 2017; for Laos-Thailand migration see Molland 2012, 2017), Nooteboom (this issue) shows how elderly women without children suffer the most from translocal tendencies in village life. Being immobile and having no children, they find themselves in the most precarious position within the village, where traditional forms of mutual support are affected by the increased mobility of villagers. This introduces a new facet of precarity in the time of mobility.

How far do the migrants themselves consider their life as precarious, particularly vis-à-vis the living conditions in their native homelands? How do individual aspirations and hopes counter present hardships and anxieties? Arguably, perceptions of precarity and opportunity are mutually constituted, and it is this very interplay that engenders the resilience and creativity of labour migrants and their families in negotiating precarity.

MOBILE LIVES IN PRECARITY: AMBIVALENCE, RESILIENCE, AND POSSIBILITIES

Research on climate adaptation refers to resilience as the ability of individuals and communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances resulting from social, political, and environmental change (Adger 2000; Adger *et al.* 2001). According to approaches inspired by ecosystem analysis (see also Sakdapolrak *et al.* 2016) as well as the more individual-focused psychological theories (Southwick *et al.* 2014), human adaptability is a key factor of resilience. Yet, resilience as a concept is as ambiguous as the term 'precarity', and caution is necessary in order not to romanticise the sufferings of precarious lives. In portraying the tactics of negotiating power and sustaining social lives of labour migrants, we underscore the possibilities engendered by their actions and aspirations without losing sight of the dislocations of labour mobility (Alipio, this issue; Nguyen, this issue).

At times, aspirations end up as shattered dreams. Leaving the countryside to embrace modern lives, rural migrants in Laos and Thailand have been shown to be subjected to coercion and exploitation (Mills 1999; Molland 2012). The dreams of social mobility and cosmopolitan lives are thwarted by the harsh realities of conducting family life long distance while remaining bounded by the demanding social relations of the workplace (Alipio, this issue; Nguyen, this issue; Nguyen 2015). At times, people are caught between the demands of new social aspirations and those of 'traditional' moral frameworks. As Nooteboom (this issue, 2015) demonstrates for rural-urban migration in Java, desires of modernity are interwoven with family obligations and social expectations in the village to drive people's actions while generating anxieties in families and communities (see also Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Nguyen 2018). It is important to consider such desires and aspirations even in the analysis of insecurity and exploitation to understand why people are ready to embrace the personal sacrifices of translocal lives.

On another level, an important facet of the resilience we observe in Southeast Asian trajectories of labour mobility is that which Michel de Certeau refers to as 'everyday tactics'. In contrast to strategies, tactics are adopted in an unknown, potentially hostile setting as flexible and opportunistic responses to specific power configurations (de Certeau 1984: 34–39). The deliberate use of diverse tactics characterises how labour migrants conduct their life and work under precarious conditions; these tactics range from indulging in illicit activities to camouflaging and manipulating formal rules. The contributions in this issue discuss a variety of such tactics that aim to subvert power relations from a weaker position, especially through "the actualization of entirely new social relations and ethical practices, through which new forms of personhood and politics are created" (Nugent 2012: 281).

Studies from the Myanmar-Thailand context (see the contributions by Gruß and Balčaitė) show two tactics of dealing with precarious citizenship: 1) capitalising

on translocal networks to manoeuvre the bureaucracy (e.g. obtaining ID cards or other certificates) and 2) blending in the host society or even becoming invisible through camouflage, thus slipping through the system of bureaucratic repression. These cases indicate tactics of dealing with the power of bureaucratic rules and social categories in which social networks play a central role. For the Karen migrants in Balčaitė's study, connections between the group categories of refugee, migrant worker, and Thai 'hill tribe' constitute a safety net for their tight-rope acts of making a living and securing citizenship in Thailand.

Minh Nguyen's analysis of migrant waste workers in urban Vietnam suggests that the interplay between the legal ambiguity of waste work and the social ambiguity of waste compels the workers to engage in illicit practices. To not be pinned down as transgressors of legal boundaries, which are intentionally kept blurry by powerful state actors, they resort to bribing and colluding with the latter in patron-client networks that afford them protection or leeway to break formal rules. Balčaitė also hints at similar practices of Karen migrants in Thailand in the informalised spaces at the margins of national economies. Adding another picture to Minh Nguyen's discussion of 'making law' (see also Endres 2014), Balčaitė introduces the so-called King's ID – the Thai Baht with the image of late king Bhumibol – as an option always at hand to deal with Thai authorities. Illegally obtained legal marriage documents also reduce migrant families' uncertainty and vulnerability even as they continue to be subjected to the arbitrariness of state power (Balčaitė, this issue; Tappe, this issue).

Finally, emerging solidarities/alliances and (fictive) kinship ties help people deal with translocal uncertainties and distress. At times, a sense of empowerment is noted in the labour migrants' tactics of cultivating patron-client ties to deal with the power hierarchy shaping migrant lives (Nguyen, this issue). In addition, ideas of a common place of origin – an element of efficacious "cultural networks" according to Angie Ngoc Tran (2013) – potentially foster solidarity among migrant communities in a climate of insecurity and harassment. These relations and alliances are part of the everyday tactics with which labour migrants navigate the precarious conditions of their lives and eventually manoeuvre with confidence the vicissitudes of translocal labour mobility.

In short, our contributions illustrate "the dialectical interplay between human agency and structural forces in specific labor migration settings" (Kitiarsa 2014: 130) that underline the mobility of people trying to carve out spaces of protection and autonomy in potentially hostile environments. The diverse ways in which people negotiate the power of contradictory forces and the demands of living between worlds leave their mark on individual identities and communal lives, generating tension and anxiety and, above all, ambivalence. However, it is also through their mundane acts of negotiating with power on a daily basis and their practices of sustaining families and social relations on the move that makes it possible for them to carry on living and hoping for a better life against the odds of precarious migrant lives.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, the people of Southeast Asia have been on the move, either as coerced labourers or as voluntary migrants, in search of a better life. Their mobility has often been characterised by precarious conditions, being constantly threatened by physical exploitation, legal prosecution, and psychological distress. Through people's everyday tactics, however, mobility has also yielded possibilities for pursuing their aspirations and forging new networks and social relations. The interplay between precarity and resilience, we argue, shapes the translocal life of labour migrants in Southeast Asia today, connecting their worlds of work and their worlds of labour, whether they are on the move within or across the border.

In this introduction, we have sought to unpack the concept of precarity against the realities of labour migration in the region, and in doing so underscored the resilience that Southeast Asian labour migrants have demonstrated through the ages. In linking present-day conditions with colonial patterns and conditions of migrant labour, we have been able to tease out the continuities and historical patterns of precarity production while showing the greater role of regional states in the matter. The translocal perspective has helped us understand precarity as linking lives 'at home' with lives 'away' with the same consideration of its implications for private and social life across locations and spaces. Our consideration of both the temporal and spatial dimensions of precarity has yielded insights into how people in the region have over time developed viable ways of dealing with it as labour migrants.

Our discussion reveals the tension, anxiety, and ambivalence engendered by the struggles of life in-between and the challenges of belonging when on the move. By examining both the world of work and the world of home in migrant lives, meanwhile, we can grasp more clearly their aspirations and the social meanings of mobility for private, familial, and communal life. Together, our ethnographic inquiries suggest the need to consider precarity as embedded in regional historical development as part of the wider processes of capitalist formation and nation building. Simultaneously, it can be understood only in relation to the translocal linkages, practices, and networks underpinning the mobile lives that people in the region increasingly take for granted.

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