

Asian Migrants and Religious Experience: From Missionary Journeys to Labor Mobility

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Suma Ikeuchi

School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Email: sikeuchi@saic.edu

This edited volume builds on the growing body of work focused on the intellectual cross-fertilization between religious studies and migration studies (pp. 20–25). The editors, Bernardo Brown and Brenda Yeoh, curated ten case studies to make three conceptual contributions to the field.

First, they emphasize the porous lines between the religious, economic, and political lives of migrants, thus shedding light on “the complicated entanglements that exist between religious motives and the socioeconomic aims that drive labor migration” (p. 12). They refuse to prioritize any one analytical variable – whether it be religious vocation or material deprivation – to explain the evolving motivations that drive migrant mobilities across borders.

Second, “migration can be the *catalyst* for religious change” (p. 13, original italics) and, inversely, religions can help migrants “reinvent themselves and take control of their transnational trajectories” (*ibid.*). Religions do not serve as a mere reservoir of traditional identity that migrants bring from the “sending country” to the “receiving country.” Rather, religion and mobility form a loose tandem, constantly stimulating and affecting each other in generative ways.

Third, Brown and Yeoh highlight the “positive agentive approach,” where “agency, freedom, and a generally more cosmopolitan outlook of the world come to the fore” (p. 15). Rather than portraying transnational migrants solely as suffering subjects struggling with alienation, displacement, and discrimination, they also foreground the creative potential of the distance from “home” that grants the freedom to experiment with religious ideas and practices.

The ten chapters that follow substantiate these three arguments in various ways. In Chapter 2, Amanda Lucia elucidates how the contemporary multidirectional spread of yoga by North American yogis is “proselytizing in rhetoric and form” (p. 40). She finds a number of profound parallels between Protestant mission and yogic vision: “yoga missionaries” (p. 40), yoga as “the gospel” (p. 65), “sermons during yoga classes” (p. 41), yogic “conversions” (p. 46), “distinctive theology” (p. 52), and yogis as a “beacon of light” (p. 53). The yogis’ spiritual claims cannot be reduced to monetary market-driven pursuits but are inextricably tied to missiological and theological discourses (p. 40).

In Chapter 3, Kenneth Dean details the two-way flows of ritual practices among the Xinghua (Henghua) people in China and Singapore. He notes that “in the study of transnational religious networks in Southeast Asia, one has to follow the money” (p. 77) because diasporic temple communities, native-place associations, and capital management have always functioned in tandem to build trust within Chinese business networks (pp. 80–81). In addition to the socioeconomic factors (pp. 87, 94, 96), Dean also highlights the embodied dimensions of ritual by describing “the passage of excitement or intensity of affect” (p. 85).

In Chapter 4, Jagath Bandara Pathirage examines the reconfiguration of religious practices among Sri Lankan Buddhist migrants in Australia. The *Katina* ritual, for example, takes place in a smaller space and the time of its parade becomes later in Australia, compared to Sri Lanka. Thus, “[t]he whole ritual event was condensed and represented as a miniature form of the original ritual” (p. 113). Although some of these adaptations to the Australian context – including the trope of

“multiculturalism” (pp. 114–17) – violate the traditional religious codes (pp. 119–20), they still attest to the flexible resiliency of “migrant religious consciousness” (p. 124).

In Chapter 5, Weishan Huang analyzes the growth of the Buddhist Tzu Chi organization in Shanghai. Founded in Taiwan and brought to China by Taiwanese entrepreneurs, Tzu Chi today attracts an increasing number of local Chinese members, owing to its focus on humanitarian social service (p. 136), its cosmopolitan allure (p. 142), and its association with Taiwanese elites and capital (p. 141). This “indigenization” (p. 137) of Tzu Chi in China encourages “the overriding of ethnic divisions through religious affiliations” (*ibid.*). However, the class- and seniority-based privilege accorded to Taiwanese members hampers the religion’s smooth transition into the trans-ethnic “traveling faith” (p. 148).

In Chapter 6, Arkotong Longkumer challenges the conceptual line between missionary journey and labor migration by elucidating the experiences of missionaries from Nagaland – “the only official Baptist Christian state in India” (p. 158). Many Naga missionaries working in the neighboring non-Christian countries such as China espouse the vision of “spiritual migration” (p. 157): that their work accrues the “spiritual capital” (pp. 169–72) necessary to turn Nagaland into a sovereign Christian country. To financially support their missions, however, Naga missionaries abroad often “refashion themselves as entrepreneurs” and “become economic migrants as a result” (p. 163).

In Chapter 7, Ester Gallo illuminates the dynamics between race, class, gender, and religion among the Indian and Filipino men who mostly work as domestics in Rome. Upon reaching Italy, they face the “downward mobility within largely *feminized* occupations” (p. 183, original italics), racialization as “docile” minority subjects (*ibid.*), and stereotype of exoticized “Catholic Asian masculinity” (p. 185). In response, many Catholic men participate in ethnic churches because the community organizing appeals to them as “a *masculine* endeavor” (p. 188, original italics). Yet others devote themselves to the Catholic reformist movement to cultivate “*sacrificial masculinity*” (p. 192, original italics).

In Chapter 8, Alexander Horstmann investigates the missiological and geopolitical dynamics of the humanitarian work by The Free Burma Rangers (FBR), mostly active in Myanmar. Founded by American missionaries, FBR frames its emergency healthcare service in the conflict zones as “a sacred struggle of good against evil” (p. 205). The local Karen recruits can transform from helpless refugees to helpful “rangers” by serving as nurses, activists, and missionaries. Although FBR can thus give them “a home, belonging, team spirit, and potentially, martyrdom and sacrifice” (p. 216), the problematic aspects of “religious patronage” (p. 210) and “soft missionization” (p. 216) persist.

In Chapter 9, Bernardo E. Brown illustrates “the clear limits that delineate the contours of a Catholic theology and social hierarchy strongly shaped by European ideas of culture, race, and tradition” (p. 223) by studying Sri Lankan Catholic migrants and priests in Italy. Although the rhetoric of multiculturalism ostensibly welcomes such foreign members (pp. 224–25), the Italian Catholic system ultimately treats migrants as temporary sojourners and priests as “back-up” clergy (p. 232) sent to remote areas less appealing to Italian priests.

In Chapter 10, Bubbles Beverly Neo Asor draws on her research about Filipino Catholic migrants in South Korea to introduce the idea of “mediated empowerment”: a system of intervention which “facilitates migrants to gain ‘control over their lives’ and help them minimize, maneuver, handle, and overcome the structural controls” (p. 247). Mediated empowerment can grow with prayers (pp. 250–55), spiritual signification (pp. 255–58), and volunteerism (pp. 258–62) but can also serve as an apparatus of control by prompting each member to perform the role of “good Christian” and “exemplary ‘guest’ of Korean society” (p. 263).

In Chapter 11, Silvia Vignato offers lucid accounts of diasporic ritual life among the descendants of Tamils in North Sumatra. Building on Fred Clothey’s idea that “the Tamil diaspora constructs itself through a constant ritualization of boundaries” (p. 273), she elucidates how rituals do not passively trace but actively reconfigure the meanings and contours of being “Tamil” and “Hindu” in the context of Indonesia. Even when the reflective ritual knowledge is sparse and the usage of their own language

is in decline, such trends do not necessarily dampen the intensity or efficacy of ritual due to the liveliness of emotive (pp. 276–82) and embodied (pp. 288–92) experiences.

In Chapter 12, Janet Alison Hoskins provides comments on the preceding chapters as an afterword. She contributes to the volume by probing “how Asian migrants may have different forms of religious experience from other migrants” (p. 305), a question that the other contributors have not squarely or extensively answered despite the focus of the book on “Asia.”

The major strength of the volume is its success in delineating the contours of religion as it is embedded in economic and political spheres of human lives. Without romanticizing religion as a transcendent reality or reducing it to a side-effect of capitalist activities, the chapters generally do a great job in illuminating the complex and shifting boundaries between the spiritual, material, and civic landscapes inhabited by transnational migrants.

This may be too demanding a request for an edited volume with such broad themes as *religion*, *migration*, and *Asia*, but I wish the sense of cohesion between chapters were a bit stronger. Some chapters speak to one another more stimulatingly and profoundly (e.g. 2, 6, and 8 center on “mission”; 3, 5, and 11 focus on capital/ritual). Consequently, the grouping of sections and conceptual buildup throughout the book have some room for improvement.

The book is suitable for the academic audience, including doctoral students, who are interested in religion, migration, and/or Asian diasporas. It would be more challenging for undergraduate students and the general public.

The study of migration and religion, like any interdisciplinary field, is challenged by the disparate set of theoretical idioms, canonical literatures, and conceptual paradigms that researchers of diverse disciplinary backgrounds bring in with them. This volume makes a valuable contribution by furthering the interdisciplinary dialogue and clearing conceptual common ground for future collaborations.

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Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking of the State in the 20th-Century Philippines

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Kerby C. Alvarez

University of the Philippines Diliman Email: kcalvarez@up.edu.ph

Lisandro Claudio’s second book titled *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking of the State in the 20th-Century Philippines* offers a discussion on liberalism and the Philippine state and society during some crucial political and intellectual periods in the country’s twentieth-century history. The author, a self-identified liberal, socialist, and critic of Maoist Marxism, has traversed critical junctures of the political and social milieu of the said century by identifying and highlighting non-conventional, nationalism-critical, and global dynamics-affiliated historical propositions and interpretations.

The book is an intellectual macro-history of the twentieth century; it problematizes the development of liberalism in the Philippines from a politico-economic standpoint and treats liberalism as a “modus vivendi”, a mediator of conflicting and contrasting political ideologies. Focusing on the academic careers and political endeavors of four select liberals of the era, namely Camilio O. Osias, Salvador Z. Araneta, Carlos P. Romulo, and Salvador P. Lopez, Claudio locates the intellectual