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SECTION INTRODUCTION

## Media, Mobilities and Identity in East and Southeast Asia: Introduction

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### Abstract

This collection for *Cultural Studies Review* aims to address gaps in existing mobilities scholarship from two perspectives. First, while several articles here discuss the physical movement of various groups, the overarching focus is the complex interplay of mobile technologies and information on the one hand, and rapidly evolving formations of culture and identity on the other. Geographically, our focus is outside the 'global north', on a region that has perhaps been more dramatically transformed by physical, cultural and informational mobility than any other: East and Southeast Asia. Rather than taking 'Asia' as a category of cultural identity, this collection conceptualises the geographic region as a zone of cultural and political plurality, in which a vast array of migrations, imaginings, representations and discourses are constantly bumping up against political and cultural borders, as well as various state-sponsored and state-sanctioned ideas and images, in fascinating and often highly volatile ways. Topic covered in this collection include Hong Kong working holidaymakers in Australia (Louis Ho), literary narratives of overseas adoptees who have returned to South Korea (Ethan Waddell), online debates and conflicts between Chinese migrants and local Chinese-Singaporeans (Sylvia Ang), the politics of representing urban demolition and relocation in independent Chinese documentaries (Dan Edwards), the 'glocalisation' of Japanese *anime* culture in the online space in China (Asako Saito) and the representation of migrant worker experience in South Korean cinema (Sina Kim).

### Keywords

**Mobility; East Asia; Southeast Asia; migration**

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Movement, mobility and the ability to enforce stasis are crucial to the economic and political functioning of the contemporary world. Our post-Fordist global economy—recent talk of trade wars and resurrected tariffs in the United States notwithstanding—relies on access to constantly shifting sources of cheap labour and resources, as well as ever-evolving markets, dispersed across the planet. This system simply could not function without the infrastructure and agreements that permit the constant, rapid movement of people, goods and information across borders and between regions. As John Urry notes: ‘There is in the modern world an accumulation of movement analogous to the accumulation of capital.’<sup>1</sup> Indeed, movement is not just analogous to the accumulation of capital—it is central to it. This reliance on mobility has developed under the auspices of increasingly cheaper, faster and further-reaching transport options on the one hand, and digital technologies facilitating the near-instantaneous transmission of information around the globe on the other hand. At the same time, as Peter Adey points out, mobility is always ‘a highly differentiated activity where many different people move in many different ways.’<sup>2</sup> Equally important to the world economic system is the ability of governments and corporations to *push* certain groups into moving, and restrict the movement of others—at times reducing particular people to a state of immobility. Restrictions on movement are just as important to the functioning of the global economic and political system as the mobility of the elite.

While the importance of mobility in today’s world has long been recognised, scholarship has, thus far, remained largely focused on the experience of mobility for those in the ‘global north’. Indeed, this was an early criticism of the whole ‘mobilities paradigm’ in the social sciences. Theorists such as Beverley Skeggs have dismissed mobility as simply ‘a celebration of a cosmopolitan intellectual ethic, that can only be realized by a small minority of people’.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the geographic and class bias of much mobilities scholarship, forms of mobility other than physical movement have often been acknowledged, but rarely interrogated in any depth. In their seminal 2006 editorial, ‘Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings’—an article that provided something of a road map for the mobilities field—Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry briefly note the importance of ‘virtual and informational mobilities’, but the physical mobilities of migration, travel, tourism and commercial trade are their key foci.<sup>4</sup>

This collection for *Cultural Studies Review* aims to address gaps in the existing scholarship from two perspectives. First, while several articles here discuss the physical movement of various groups—Hong Kong holiday makers, Korean adoptees returning to their place of birth, mainland Chinese migrants in Singapore—the overarching focus is the complex interplay of mobile technologies and information on the one hand, and rapidly evolving formations of culture and identity on the other. Geographically, our focus is on a region that has perhaps been more dramatically transformed by physical, cultural and informational mobility than any other: East and Southeast Asia.

1 John Urry, ‘Does Mobilities Have a Future?’ in *Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society*, ed. Margaret Grieco and John Urry, Ashgate, Farnham UK, 2012, p. 3.

2 Peter Adey, ‘If Mobility is Everything Then it is Nothing: Towards a Relational Politics of (Im)mobilities’, *Mobilities*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 2006, p. 83.

3 Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 54.

4 Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry, ‘Editorial: *Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings*’, *Mobilities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1–22.

While steadily increasing levels of wealth and mobility were, broadly speaking, the norm for many in Western societies in the postwar era, the decades following World War II in Asia were marked by fervent nationalisms in newly founded, postcolonial nation-states, stark poverty and rigid Cold War divisions. The economic rise of the so-called ‘Asian Tigers’—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan—from the late 1960s, followed by the opening up of the Chinese economy from the early 1990s, has not only facilitated the rise of a truly global economy, but has also led to unprecedented levels of economic integration within the region. This economic integration has, in turn, led to increased physical mobility—both forced and voluntary—for many in East and Southeast Asia and, to a lesser extent, an uneven cultural integration. Many of these shifts are not necessarily apparent if we remain at the level of the nation-state, as several articles in this collection highlight. Greater social and physical mobility, combined with the rise of networked digital technologies, has generated new sub-national cultural and identity formations that contest, interact with and bump up against postwar understandings of the ‘nation’ in all kinds of ways.

Let us first briefly consider the claim that physical movement within East and Southeast Asia has risen dramatically, radically altering the demographic makeup of certain areas, with three illustrative examples. China’s increasing economic integration into the region and growing wealth has generated a highly mobile population of unskilled and semi-skilled workers constantly seeking out work and improved prospects, alongside a more specialised white-collar workforce and business elite also constantly hunting for employment opportunities and desirable places to live. Singapore’s prosperity, highly developed infrastructure, predominantly Sinophone culture, and positioning as a key financial and transportation hub, has made it an important destination for this mobile population in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Nearly one million mainland Chinese migrants have arrived in Singapore over the past twenty years, in a country where the total population was only around four million at the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> This influx has sparked sometimes fierce debates about what constitutes a ‘Chinese’ cultural identity, between and within groups that are nominally culturally and ethnically related. These debates have mainly played out in the online realm, where widespread access to computers and mobile devices has facilitated a discourse open to a wide array of Singaporeans and Chinese from varying classes: a discourse that has developed outside more traditional channels of communication long ‘guided’ by the Singaporean state, such as newspapers and television.

Further north in the Republic of Korea (more commonly known in the English-speaking world as South Korea), labour shortages and an aging population have led to the first wave of mass migration into the country, especially from neighbouring China. According to the South Korean Government, by 2016 foreign-born nationals comprised nearly 4 per cent of Korea’s population, and this figure is set to rise dramatically in the coming decades.<sup>6</sup> In a small country formerly known for its cultural and ethnic homogeneity, this represents a marked change in the population and culture, raising important questions about what it means to be ‘Korean’, and the rights that go with Korean citizenship, in an increasingly multicultural nation.

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5 Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, ‘Chinese Migration to Singapore: Discourses and Discontents in a Globalizing Nation-State’, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, p. 35.

6 Republic of Korea Ministry of Justice, *Monthly Report on Immigration and Foreign Policy Statistics*, March 2016, p. 4, [http://www.immigration.go.kr/doc\\_html/attach/imm/f2016//20160428254369\\_1\\_1.hwp.files/Sections1.html](http://www.immigration.go.kr/doc_html/attach/imm/f2016//20160428254369_1_1.hwp.files/Sections1.html).

While these first two examples illustrate the significant impact around the region of immigration from China, inside the People's Republic one of the largest migrations in human history has played out since the early 1990s, as a burgeoning industrial sector, combined with a lack of government investment in rural areas, has encouraged hundreds of millions of farmers to pour into cities. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, for the first time more than half the country's vast population lived in urban areas by the end of 2011.<sup>7</sup> That is, a formerly agrarian nation in which most of the population had long-standing attachments to villages that stretched back over centuries, has in the space of one generation been transformed into a highly urbanised society with a labour force that is constantly on the move.

Parallel to this rise in physical mobility in the Asia region, over the past two decades an increasingly interconnected and regionalised media sector has boomed. The entertainment and media market of the Asia-Pacific is now estimated to be worth a staggering US\$650 billion, up from around US\$378 billion a decade earlier.<sup>8</sup> A regional mediasphere has been consolidating, with cross-border mobility of media intensifying due to ubiquitous broadband connectivity and cheap, mobile media technologies, as Asian societies have leap-frogged to a stage of late or 'compressed' modernity.<sup>9</sup> On an individual level, the complex fluidity this compressed modernity creates is evident in the way the internet, mobile technologies and digital image-making devices have revolutionised how ordinary people negotiate local, national and transnational spaces. Unprecedented levels of connectivity have facilitated a level of mediated communication never seen before, via calls and text messages from mobile devices, social media posts and messaging, and widespread 'sharing' of ideas, images and news online. Connectivity has also brought individuals of divergent ages, ethnicities, religions, political views and nationalities together in the online space, where, as several articles in this collection highlight, their differences and divisions have often been sharpened under the conditions of perceived anonymity in the online realm (even if this anonymity is largely illusory).

Within Asia, as elsewhere, it is also important to highlight that the increasing prevalence of multiple forms of mobility has developed alongside tightening controls over media and information in many nations, as well as a revival of nationalism and reassertions of ethnic identities in places such as China, Japan, Korea and Singapore. Social disparities have also become more marked across much of the region. These seemingly contradictory developments only reaffirm the pertinence of Adey's claim that 'mobility, like power, is a relational thing'.<sup>10</sup> Mobility has opened up spaces and possibilities in contemporary Asia unimaginable only a generation ago, but the *restriction* of virtual and physical mobility has also become a key strategy in contemporary forms of social control.

Rather than providing a study of large-scale migrations across Asia, or an account of the booming commercial media sector across the region, this collection burrows down to a sub-national and in some cases socially micro level, to consider how both physical

7 National Bureau of Statistics of China, 'Total Population by Urban and Rural Residence and Birth Rate, Death Rate, Natural Growth Rate by Region 2011', [www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2012/indexeh.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2012/indexeh.htm).

8 'Value of the Asia-Pacific Entertainment and Media Market from 2007 to 2016 (in billion US dollars)', Statista, [www.statista.com/statistics/237758/value-of-the-asia-pacific-entertainment-and-media-market/](http://www.statista.com/statistics/237758/value-of-the-asia-pacific-entertainment-and-media-market/).

9 Chang Kyung-Sup, 'The Second Modern Condition? Compressed Modernity as Internalised Reflexive Cosmopolitization', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 61, no. 3, p. 446.

10 Adey, p. 83.

and technological mobilities are reshaping everyday experience, individual subjectivities and representations generated outside the state-corporate structures that dominate Asia's commercial mediascape. In taking this approach, we seek to answer Wang Hui's call to go beyond 'modern Asian imaginaries' based on analyses at the level of nation-states and/or inter-state relations.<sup>11</sup> Rather than taking 'Asia' as a category of identity—a highly problematic construct that itself is derived from categories of European empire—this collection conceptualises Asia as a zone of cultural and political plurality, in which a vast array of migrations, imaginings, representations and discourses are constantly bumping up against political and cultural borders, as well as various state-sponsored and state-sanctioned ideas and images, in fascinating and often highly volatile ways. In keeping with this approach, the articles have been grouped not according to geographic areas or nation-states, but rather two primary conceptual areas, which also overlap.

## Shifting ethnoscapes

Louis Ho and Ethan Waddell open this collection with articles focusing on physical movement in the Asia region, highlighting the rapidly changing nature of what Arjun Appadurai calls ethnoscapes—or those 'landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live'.<sup>12</sup> In contemporary Asia, ethnoscapes comprise 'tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons', that Appadurai notes are affecting the 'politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree'.<sup>13</sup> Ho and Waddell highlight two very particular, little researched groups within the transforming ethnoscapes of the Asia region.

In 'Toward Cultural Policy Studies on Mobility', Louis Ho discusses the fact that over the past decade Australia has welcomed increasing numbers of young travellers, international students and permanent migrants from Asia under different policies and initiatives. Using the theoretical groundwork offered by John Urry's notion of the 'social as mobility' and Jeremy Ahearne's idea of 'implicit cultural policy', Ho focuses on the Hong Kong Working Holiday scheme, arguing that existing cultural policy studies have been stuck in the understanding of the 'social as society'. In doing so, he demonstrates that cultural policy studies should consider the critical efficacy of the mobilities paradigm to examine how various policies channel and engage with a variety of mobilities, thereby further developing the branch of mobility-related cultural policy research.

In 'Literary Media, the Transnational Mobility of Trauma, and Ethnic National Identity in Jane Jeong Trenka's *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea* (2009)', Ethan Waddell examines migration of a very different kind. Since 1997, the South Korea government has granted adult overseas adoptees temporary visits or long-term stays, in line with official policies embracing multiculturalism. This process of 'return' is often described as a 'roots' or 'motherland tour' by adoption agencies and Korean NGOs. Waddell questions the ideological implications of this return to a supposed motherland through a discussion of Trenka's memoir, *Fugitive Visions*:

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11 Wang Hui, 'The Politics of Imagining Asia: A Genealogical Analysis', trans. Matthew A. Hale, *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2007, p. 28.

12 Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1996, p. 33.

13 Ibid.

*An Adoptee's Return to Korea* (2009). Through careful analysis of Trenka's text, Waddell shows how the writer negotiates the personal politics of 'returning' to a country she barely knows, by strategically appropriating ideologies of Korean ethnic nationalism to assert her right to a place within today's Korean community. Waddell's article highlights the important role of media—including 'old' media such as books—in discursively asserting various forms of identity within the increasingly complex and contested ethnoscaapes of East Asia.

## Evolving techno-mediascapes

Waddell's focus on discursively constructed identity reminds us that various forms of media—especially mass forms such as film and television—have long played a crucial part in shaping conceptions of identity and culture across Asia. In the postwar period, newspapers, film and television all played an important part in helping propagate notions of national identity in newly formed nation-states, some of which had no pre-colonial history as united political entities. Sylvia Ang's "I am more Chinese than you": Online Narratives of Locals and Migrants in Singapore', illustrates how digital technologies of the twenty-first century, particularly the internet, have not only radically reconfigured Asia's mediascape, but also intersected with greater physical mobility to redefine ethnic identities (and divisions) in new and unexpected ways. Ang considers how the massive influx of mainland Chinese immigrants into Singapore has seen local online forums become sites of competing, often fiercely contested, notions of 'Chineseness'. Analysing online commentary by both mainland Chinese migrants and Chinese-Singaporeans, Ang concludes that debates around language proficiency have become central to the contested notion of Chineseness in a Singaporean context. Mainland immigrants have responded to charges that they lack 'traditional Chinese values' by deriding Singaporeans' supposed lack of proficiency in Mandarin, rendering them less 'Chinese' in many mainland migrants' eyes. Singaporeans, in their turn, frequently deride newcomers' lack of English-speaking ability. Ang also notes, however, that Chinese-Singaporean online narratives fragment along generational and class lines. Ang's study reveals a fascinating example of how greater connectivity and physical proximity has not necessarily resulted in the reduction of cultural, linguistic and national divisions. In this instance, differences between groups supposedly sharing a common cultural background have arguably been intensified by ready access to user-generated public discourse.

Dan Edwards' article, 'Demolition, Documentary and the Politics of *Minjian* on Contemporary Chinese Screens', also highlights how the enhanced ability to create public representations outside traditional mass media channels has revealed new fractures, contestations and divisions within nation-states. Edwards offers a close reading of a trio of independent Chinese documentaries depicting the experience of *chaiqian* (demolition and relocation) in contemporary China: Ou Ning's *Meishi Street* (2006), Shu Haolun's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Du Haibin's *A Young Patriot* (2015). Through these films, Edwards illustrates how mobile digital cameras have opened up 'unofficial' spaces of localised grassroots culture on screen, known in Chinese as *minjian*. In this sense, mobile cameras have allowed for a certain intervention in the overarching narratives of progress and national advancement propagated by the Chinese government through state-sanctioned media products. In the documentaries Edwards examines, *minjian* functions as a site of contestation to the coercive imposition of a globalised modernity on Chinese cities—based on the state's ability to forcibly move urban residents—as these films represent, dramatise, interrogate and, to varying degrees, critique the social and physical impacts of the top-down 'modernisation' of China.



Asako Saito similarly traces how digital technology, in this instance the internet, functions as a site of subtle cultural resistance to ongoing attempts by states to control, regulate and even prevent the flow of cultural objects across borders. Saito's 'Moe and Internet Memes: The Resistance and Accommodation of Japanese Popular Culture in China', considers how the Chinese state's attempt to ban Japanese *anime* in the 1990s, along with plans to introduce spyware onto every computer in China in the late 2000s, generated a form of resistance in which the Japanese popular cultural concept of *moe* was 'glocalised' in the satirical figure of the 'Green Dam Girl'. Saito's study shows how internet users undermined authorities with the very thing the state aimed to eliminate: a localised form of regionally influential Japanese popular culture. The Green Dam Girl example demonstrates how mass culture increasingly plays out at an 'unofficial' level, via internet memes and various forms of content generated outside traditional commercial and state media channels, often bypassing or frustrating attempts by states to regulate culture within national borders.

This trio of articles by Ang, Edwards and Saito illustrates how technology—especially of a digital kind—and media have facilitated mobility in terms of shifting conceptions of individual and group identity, within larger national formations. They also trace the increased ability of different groups to create publicly accessible representations, from Singaporean nationalists online, to ordinary urban citizens wielding DV cameras in Chinese cities, to Chinese *anime* fans circulating glocalised cultural creations via the internet that satirise governmental controls.

While digital and connective technologies have undoubtedly had a dramatic impact on mediascapes in Asia, Sina Kim's article, 'Who are the Real Insiders?: Ambivalent Dynamics between a Korean and Immigrant Labourers in *He's on Duty*', is an important reminder that longer-standing media forms such as cinema continue to play an important part in shaping and representing the impact of social, technological and physical mobility on Asian societies. With theoretical framing drawn from Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kim's article examines Yook Sanghyo's 2010 film, *He's on Duty*, which depicts the conflict and friendship between a Korean man pretending to be an illegal worker from Bhutan, and his co-workers from a range of other Asian countries. Kim contends that, from a class-oriented perspective, both Korea's poor and migrant workers are located in the same social stratum—a kind of transnational proletariat generated by the globalised neoliberal economy. As Kim suggests, the film not only captures the increased heterogeneity of Korean society under the auspices of neoliberal economics, but also shows how the intrusion of racial 'others' into this formerly ethnically homogenous society is challenging notions of Korean identity, while starkly revealing the discursive and constructed nature of received racial categories.

These articles draw on a range of ideas from cultural, screen and policy studies. They illustrate how these fields can not only bring new perspectives to the study of mobilities in the contemporary world, but also flesh out the blind spots apparent in the mobilities paradigm as it has played out in the social sciences—by extending the concern with mobility outside the global north, and by considering how cultural and technological mobilities are intersecting with movements associated with migrations, tourism, guest workers and so on to reshape how individuals and sub-national groups understand themselves and their culture. In keeping with the desire to step outside the existing parameters within which previous scholarship concerning mobility has remained, the editors of this special section have specifically targeted emerging scholars from a range of institutions in Asia and Australia. These are also scholars

who have spent all, or a considerable part, of their lives in and around the Asia region, observing as well as experiencing the kinds of changes and challenges these articles describe. We hope this collection not only extends understanding of the complex changes taking place in East and Southeast Asia today, but also introduces these important new scholars a broader international readership.

## About the authors

Dan Edwards is an independent scholar and writer based in Melbourne, Australia, who received his PhD in Film and Television Studies from Monash University in 2014. He has taught at Monash, Melbourne, RMIT and Swinburne universities. His debut monograph, *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics*, was published in 2015. His research interests include the representation of Asian modernities on screen, documentary networks in East Asia, and Australian cinema.

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