

NEW MOBILITIES IN ASIA



Edited by Bernardo E. Brown and Brenda S.A. Yeoh

Asian Migrants and Religious Experience

From Missionary Journeys
to Labor Mobility

Amsterdam
University
Press

Asian Migrants and Religious Experience

New Mobilities in Asia

In the 21st century, human mobility will increasingly have an Asian face. Migration from, to, and within Asia is not new, but it is undergoing profound transformations. Unskilled labour migration from the Philippines, China, India, Burma, Indonesia, and Central Asia to the West, the Gulf, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand continues apace. Yet industrialization in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India, the opening of Burma, and urbanization in China is creating massive new flows of internal migration. China is fast becoming a magnet for international migration from Asia and beyond.

Meanwhile, Asian students top study-abroad charts; Chinese and Indian managers and technicians are becoming a new mobile global elite as foreign investment from those countries grows; and Asian tourists are fast becoming the biggest travellers and the biggest spenders, both in their own countries and abroad.

These new mobilities reflect deep-going transformations of Asian societies and their relationship to the world, impacting national identities and creating new migration policy regimes, modes of transnational politics, consumption practices, and ideas of modernity. The series will, for the first time, bring together studies by historians, anthropologists, geographers, and political scientists that systematically explore these changes.

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From the chapters in this book, many connections can be traced between overlapping themes lying at the intersection of studies of migration and religion across Asia and beyond. The contributors to this volume have their own crisscrossing trajectories that have often converged in past collaborations and projects, and have since this book opened new paths for future partnerships. All of the chapters in the book evolved from the conference “Migrant Communities and Religious Experience in Asia”, held at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore in August 2015. However, many of the participants had already been exchanging ideas for a long time and took this opportunity to delve deeper into the theme of mobile religions in Asia. This collection of essays is the corollary of the very stimulating discussions we held in Singapore, and of the next two years in which we continued to exchange ideas and research findings in preparation for this volume. As editors, we are pleased that this book is not only the conclusion of an exciting collaboration, but also the harbinger of new and innovative research partnerships.

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1 Introduction

Human Mobility as Engine of Religious Change

Bernardo E. Brown and Brenda S.A. Yeoh

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There is a fundamental obstacle that makes the combined study of religion and migration particularly difficult: while migration is perceived as the realm of the mobile and transient, religion is imagined as the province of the spatially fixed and historically enduring. Contemporary efforts to bring both areas of research together within a common field are not rare, yet they tend to privilege the disciplinary background of the authors, relegating either religion or migration to a complementary status from their main focus of research. For example, when scholars of religion engage with migration and transnationalism, mobile religious practices appear as an epiphenomenon of global conditions that give rise to unique dynamics which are worthy of study, but not of intrinsic importance to understand religion itself. Robert Orsi's seminal work in *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985) is a preeminent illustration of how scholars of religion have explored migrant religiosity as a space of identity formation and reconnection to the homeland, but where migration only sets the stage for a particular spatiotemporal approach to the study of religious practices amongst migrant communities.

From the opposite perspective, scholars of migration and transnationalism recognize the importance of religion in the lives of migrants as a means to give a community visibility in the host society (Baumann 2009; Sinha 2006), to provide safety nets and networks of employment and solidarity (Hagan 2008; Bautista 2016), and to sustain membership in multiple locations (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004). To take one example, Peggy Levitt's work in *The Transnational Villagers* (2001) accords migrant religion generous treatment, yet the approach remains firmly situated in the field of transnational studies, only marginally engaging with scholars whose research is rooted within a religious studies perspective.

Despite the different aspects of religion in migration that these influential research projects emphasize, there are two premises that they share. Firstly, migrants are seen as having a religious identity that they bring with them to their place of settlement and that they use in different ways to reinforce attachments or highlight boundaries; meanwhile, the ethical and theological underpinnings of religious affiliation itself are never seriously brought into question. Religious attachments thus are thought to remain firmly rooted in the country of origin and the desire of migrant communities to maintain them as intact as possible is usually taken for granted. Secondly, transnational migrants are perceived to be motivated primarily by economic factors and thus should be distinguished from other travelers – like pilgrims and missionaries – driven by religious inspiration to leave their homeland. The religiously-minded going on holy pilgrimages and embarking on missionary projects are therefore assumed to be exclusively motivated by their religious devotion and pursue pious objectives that remain untainted by material interests.

As a departure, this book turns the focus toward cases where these two premises cannot be easily taken for granted. The Asian migrant communities that the chapters examine are especially characterized by their nonconformist attitudes toward religious traditions and conventions, and their bold efforts to make an impact on the spiritual lives of those they encounter abroad. We aim to highlight those cases when migration does not represent an instance for the reinforcement of religious identity, but when distance becomes an opportunity to question one's beliefs and to explore new avenues of religious experience. At the same time, it is not easy to draw a clear line between transnational migration and missionary voyages, a fact that emphasizes the complicated entanglements that exist between religious motives and the socioeconomic aims that drive labor migration. We thus propose that the arbitrary boundaries of what is strictly defined as a religious journey should be replaced by more porous lines, where the interconnectivity of transnational voyages brings the richness of the migrant experience to bear upon creative forms of religious practice.

A Mobilities Lens for the Study of Religion

New methodological inroads developed from a *mobilities* perspective have made researchers more aware that human migration should not be studied independently from material, technological, and financial modes

of circulation (Urry & Sheller 2006; Chu 2010; Basu & Coleman 2008).¹ Such models emphasize the complexity of contemporary transnational social networks and the rich analyses that scholars can produce when they delve beyond their own specializations to explore their work from various disciplinary intersections (Taylor 2001). This volume collectively furthers this argument, yet it highlights that scholarship on mobility also needs to seriously consider the movements generated by networks of religious circulation to understand contemporary transnational dynamics.²

Mindful of the challenges that this task presents us with, we attempt to examine those instances when migration can become the *catalyst* for religious change. Taking such an approach implies moving away from literature that aims to follow unidirectional migrant trajectories from “sending” to “receiving” countries and how, through religious practice, individuals and communities sustain – albeit with innovations and adaptations – their ties to their home countries and the values of their communities of origin. Rather than imagining migrants who struggle not to lose culture and religion, we suggest that it is worth doing the exercise of reversing these terms in order to open up new ways of interpreting the experience of lived religion in the context of migration.

From our perspective, contemporary religions can hardly be characterized as tradition-bound and static social organizations whose sole duty is to reconnect people to their affective roots in the home country; quite on the contrary, religions provide migrants one of the most effective ways to reinvent themselves and take control of their transnational trajectories (Adogame & Shankar 2012; Cao & Lau 2013, 2014). In the process, the religious landscape of the host societies is transformed by cross-border religious activities and the mobility of sacred artifacts, rituals, and spirits (Hüwelmeier 2013; Kitiarsa 2010; Sinha 2006; Lucia 2014). These transnational religious exchanges should not be approached as simple cross-border transactions between different communities, but should rather reflect that

1 From a traditional social-scientific perspective, travel has largely operated as a black box, a neutral set of technologies and processes predominantly permitting forms of economic, social, and political life that are seen as explicable in terms of other, more causally powerful processes (Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006, 4). The literature *mobilities* challenges this model by focusing on how material and human circulation interact with the technologies that make it possible. A focus on mobility thus problematizes models that see stability and place as the “natural” anchored state of things, and mobility as the exception.

2 Religious networks and circulation in our understanding should consider the movement of sacred texts, ideas, and pilgrims, but also more broadly the circulation of religious specialists, materials, and scholars.

migrant and nonmigrant religious life occurs within the contours of a single transnational social field in which changes on one side affect the religious practices observed on the other (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004).

While the search for continuity and the efforts to sustain traditions are indeed a central aspect of migratory journeys, rupture from unquestioned religious practices and long-standing traditional rituals is for many the driving inspiration to pursue religion and spiritual interests in new ways. Multicultural policies that attempt to regulate migrant religiosity by creating ethno-linguistic spaces to integrate and welcome cultural diversity in host societies have often been rejected by migrants themselves, who are wary of the modern state's neoliberal restructuring agenda. In her ethnographic work in suburban Massachusetts, Glick-Schiller notes that migrant communities were not receptive to the government's diversity initiatives, and instead "Buddhist, Muslim and Pentecostal Christian migrants created religious institutions that did not publicly highlight the ethnic or national background of their members" (2011, 223). Such actions to independently determine their own views about religion and culture also show that migrant religion has a political dimension that cannot be merely treated as another variety of ethnic cultural expression. Migration here is experienced as an instance to creatively develop alliances and collaborations capable of challenging institutional and governmental regulatory attempts. In these situations, migration can become a turning point that enables the exploration of alternative forms of religious experience as well as new forms of political identification. These emerging modes of religiosity, however, often cohabit uneasily with traditionalist movements (van der Veer 2002), and as a consequence, manifold tensions emerge within religious migrant communities over how to introduce innovations without generating new conflicts with host societies, the state, and those who remain in the home country.

Migrant Spiritual Agency

At the level of the individual, recent scholarship in migration studies has similarly noted that migration can sometimes be experienced as a liberating transition away from moral constraints and as an opportunity to discover new interests at a distance from the gaze of the hometown. Such an emphasis is particularly salient amongst scholars of gender and sexuality, where distance is interpreted more as a source of freedom than an instance of dislocation and nostalgia (Chang & Groves 2000; Ueno 2013; Tsujimoto 2014; Constable 1999; Parreñas 2011; Brown 2017). While this

approach has cast the experience of migration in a different light – where agency, freedom, and a generally more cosmopolitan outlook of the world come to the fore – it has also attracted considerable debate (Pratt & Yeoh 2003). The positive agentic approach, however, has not been particularly influential in other areas of transnational studies, so this book represents an attempt to highlight, in the context of religious experience and spirituality, the different creative ways in which distance from country of origin, family, and community provide key conditions that encourage migrants to explore their spiritual yearnings at a safe distance from the judgmental gaze of traditional religious authorities and unconstrained by conventional rituals and devotional discipline.

While religion has often been described as an anchor that orients migrants who become alienated from ethical values and practices, this ignores the flexibility and creativity that characterize contemporary mobile religious beliefs and practices. If migration offers a unique opportunity to explore new cultural and sexual identities away from the censoring gaze of the home, it is also a fertile ground to venture into alternative forms of religiosity and develop new paths to transcendence that circumvent the duties of tradition (Vogel 2014; Chen 2008; Hoskins 2014).

While in the work of authors like Orsi (1985), Levitt (2001, 2007), Jacqueline Hagan (2008) and Thomas Tweed (2002, 2008), religion plays a fundamental role in alleviating the stress of alienation and displacement produced by transnational migration, our chapters highlight a very different dynamic. In *Asian Migrants and Religious Experience*, migration is often narrated as an opportunity to discover and experiment with new forms of religiosity that are frowned upon by communities of origin or are simply unavailable at home. Moreover, these chapters collectively show that migration is also often described as an unparalleled occasion to establish connections with new people in host communities, or to bring the religious message of the migrants to new potential converts. For both of these types of migrant communities, distance is experienced as a blessing rather than a burden that is alleviated by religious practice. Indeed, the political and economic conditions that are often the unwelcome reasons behind transnational migration lose their utilitarian explicative power in individual migrant narratives, to be replaced by the enthusiasm and conviction of religious fervor.

The chapter by Asor in this book is a preeminent example of how narratives of migration are cast anew through the lens of religion. Although the anxieties of undocumented migrant precarity in South Korea remain a looming concern for the Filipino migrants that she follows, the new challenges that they face in Seoul encourage them to delve into previously

unexplored sides of their personality and rediscover their skills in ways that only distance from the home can make possible. Religion thus has the capacity to re-signify migration and assign new meanings to the experience of movement to faraway locations, transforming identities and narratives through tropes of pilgrimage, mission, and the higher calling. Like Asor, Gallo is interested in how an experience that is usually described as degrading and alienating can be reshaped through religious participation into a meaningful sojourn in new lands. Her chapter focuses on the intersection between religion, migration, and masculinity, to emphasize how church participation renovates the narrative of migration of Malayali Christians in Italy. These migrants – who make a living as domestic workers and feel that they must renounce their professional qualifications in order to perform what they regard as an emasculating job – are able to reassert their masculinity by taking on active leadership roles in the context of their religious congregation.

Religion therefore becomes a fundamental motivating factor for transnational migrants, often blurring the boundaries between mission and labor migration. Contributions to this volume by Huang and Longkumer eloquently show the difficulty in drawing a clear dividing line between the religious and the financial dimensions of contemporary migratory experiences. Huang examines how Taiwanese entrepreneurs in Shanghai make use of their office spaces to hold Tzu Chi Buddhism meetings, while Longkumer focuses on Nagaland Christian missionaries in China who become transnational workers in order to finance (and sometimes disguise) their religious mission. Religious proselytizing and labor migration in such instances are complementary projects, and what at first sight appear to be independent and conflicting material and spiritual objectives, turn out to constitute a dynamic relationship that enables and potentiates each other's reach.

This mutually reinforcing phenomenon also serves to question traditional missionary structures that locate the financial engine for proselytizing in sending communities while missionaries exclusively spend these funds in destination outposts (Zehner 2005). Moreover, both of these chapters also demonstrate the masking effects of labor migration, amidst anxieties that religious proselytizing produces for state authorities in countries like China, where even the activities of very small congregations are zealously monitored.

These examples reveal that religion plays an important role in the development of social bonds between migrant and host communities. Whereas much of the literature has stressed how religious participation shapes

migrant identities, this book emphasizes that religion has the capacity of overriding national, linguistic, and racial boundaries. Indeed, as clearly shown in chapters by Huang, Gallo and Brown, while ethnic tensions and apprehensive stereotypes between locals and migrants remain, a shared religious project puts their common goals above these differences. Religious experience and change in transnational social fields therefore work in both directions: migrants experiment with new forms of spirituality, while host communities are presented with an expanded religious marketplace. Both of these movements stress the opportunities for crossover, experimentation, and innovation that migration enables, offering thus a new way of interpreting the dynamics of religious practice in highly mobile contexts.

Connecting the World through Religion

Underpinning our arguments is the useful classification proposed by Diana Wong and Peggy Levitt (2014, 349), who make a distinction between migrant religions and traveling faiths. In their words, “migrant religions travel within the local ethnic confines of the migrant (and home) population, even as they reterritorialize and adapt to new contexts. Traveling faiths, conversely, are religious movements with universal claims around which a religious community forms (deterritorialized religions) that travel to proselytize.” Some of our chapters correspond with the model of migrant religions (Dean, Pathirage, Vignato), emphasizing the knitting together of material and spiritual networks in contexts that stretch from historically localized diasporas such as the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and Hindu Tamils in northern Sumatra, to the recent struggles of emplacement undergone by Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists in northern Australia. Meanwhile other chapters in this book better fit the definition of traveling faiths (Horstmann, Longkumer, Huang), where the missionary objective of transcending borders is pursued under the guise of migrant labor, conflict zone healthcare, and entrepreneurial investments.

A third group is also identifiable in our volume but is harder to classify following the traveling faiths/migrant religions model, as it traverses a combination of the two categories. The chapters by Gallo and Brown examine religious initiatives originally developed with one specific migrant community in mind, that later remake and expand their targets to include others in the host societies. Moreover, the work of Lucia further complicates this, as seen in the way recipients of an imported practice like yoga in the United States, later adapt it and become its promoter around the world. Those who

experiment with new forms of religious practice when unconstrained by the limits imposed by their own religious tradition give new meaning to their migratory itineraries by reaching out to new populations which they aim to attract to their fold.³ What these chapters highlight is the need to broaden the range and complexity of spiritual relationships that can emerge between migrant and host communities and search for new approaches that trace religious borders that do not neatly follow those of the nation (Vasquez & Marquandt 2003; Vasquez & Knott 2014; van der Veer 2002). Clearly, much more than zealous religious proselytizing and devotional diasporic rituals aimed at reproducing the traditions of the home taking place in the spiritual worlds of contemporary migrant populations.

Although the classification proposed by Wong & Levitt (2014) is a useful tool for the analysis of Asian migrant and diasporic communities undertaken in this book, our chapters collectively place a stronger emphasis on the connections and interactions that are developed between different communities *through religion* in transnational social spaces. The volume shows that although migrant communities usually trace their religious identity to a specific tradition in the home country, the lived religious experiences (Orsi 2006) observable in the context of migration produce a much more convoluted reality. Religious ritual and emplacement have often been approached as a key instrument for the reinforcement of cultural boundaries for communities (Baumann & Salentin 2006; Smith 1987; Warner & Wittner 1998), but are rarely understood as an instance that is capable of doing precisely the opposite.

In this volume, we argue that shared religious beliefs have the capacity of overriding ethnic, linguistic, and national boundaries. This does not mean that divisions disappear and intra-religious conflict subsides, but it suggests that communities that seemingly have little in common, actually have a powerful motive to transcend the walls that separate them. Pathirage's chapter is illuminating in this way as it dwells on how migrant communities from three different countries share a Buddhist temple in Australia and are faced with the need to relax certain national traditions in order to build bonds with others who share their religious beliefs. Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists find that they need to stretch their sense of what is appropriate to do in a temple, allowing for musical genres, dress codes, and even eating habits of other communities under the umbrella of Buddhism.

3 Moreover, some religious movements are constituted as an entirely diasporic phenomenon, as exemplified by the Vietnamese Cao Đài, who preach a diasporic doctrine cemented on the loss of their country as part of a divine plan to globalize their religion (Hoskins 2014, 2015).

Although the line that divides what is acceptable behavior in a sacred space in Sri Lanka is clear, these borders need to be negotiated and redefined when Sri Lankans realize that other Buddhists are not as concerned with modesty or vegetarianism, for example. So while Buddhism indeed helps these Sri Lankans maintain the traditions of their homeland, it is not a straightforward process of spatial relocation. In order to make use of the temple in Darwin, these Theravada Buddhists realize that it is necessary to embrace the concept of a broader multicultural, shared sacred space.

Vignato's work with Tamil Hindus in Sumatra also offers a valuable insight because of the long history extending to colonial times that this community has in Indonesia. As her chapter shows, most participants in the Hindu devotional rituals that she examines have little clue of the religious meaning of what they are doing, although they have a profound sense of it being constitutive of their identity as a diasporic community. Yet only select social relationships are reproduced from the Indian context, others are created anew, many times in opposition to what would be acceptable in Tamil Nadu. Vignato's examination offers a unique insight into the forging of inter-caste interactions that would be censured in India but that make sense when situated in the ethno-nationalist milieu of Indonesia.

Religious practice as a phenomenon that transcends boundaries rather than one that replaces them is an aspect of migrant religiosity that has been overlooked, yet it emerges as a subject on which migrants often spend considerable time and effort. Brown's chapter similarly deals with Catholics who are also from Sri Lanka but in their migratory experience in Italy encounter many new ways of being Catholic. Although these alternative forms of religious practice do not necessarily transform their own preferred forms of devotion, it profoundly changes the way in which they understand their religion.

Asian Migrants and Religious Experience therefore emphasizes instances of religious innovation, hybrid practices, multi-ethnic, and pluri-lingual celebrations that characterize the way in which people live their spirituality as transnational agents. Another important aspect of the approach that we take that departs from previous efforts to study religion and migration is that we minimize the focus on religious adaptation (Barker 2014; Baumann 2009). By doing this, we turn the focus away from how religions adapt to the conditions imposed by transnationalism and migrant labor regimes, to highlight instead the multifarious ways in which individuals and small communities combine moral values, religious principles, and political projects to pursue their spiritual interests (Hoskins 2015). This becomes particularly salient, for example, in a hierarchical and highly structured

religious institution like the Catholic Church which leaves relatively little space for religious innovation. As becomes clear in contributions to this volume by Gallo and Brown, the very rigidity of the institution is an incentive for individuals and small migrant communities to dialogue with others and generate creative initiatives to live their religion with others who share in the same faith.

Anthropologist Thomas Csordas (2014) proposes the concept of “fractal pluralism” to account for such situations where the concept of religious pluralism in a given society is reshaped in order to account for diversity not only amongst but also within religions. Similarly, Steven Vertovec (2007; Meissner & Vertovec 2015) coins the concept of super-diversity arguing that “conventional multiculturalism, is inadequate and often inappropriate for dealing with individual immigrants’ needs or understanding their dynamics of inclusion or exclusion” (2007, 1039). Indeed, in many host communities, classifications such as Muslim, Buddhist, or Catholic have become increasingly insufficient categories of analysis as they fail to provide useful insights when they encompass migrants with different linguistic, cultural, national, and class origins.

We thus build on transnational theories that posit the centrality of examining the lives of migrant workers situated in the context of transnational urban networks that transcend borders but which are also inseparable from their interactions with host communities (van der Veer 2015). In the rest of this introduction we situate the works included in this volume against the backdrop of some of the most important contributions to the literature on religion and migration, highlighting how each of the chapters in the book helps us strengthen the idea that religion is more than a vehicle for reinforcing identities. Religious practice for the Asian migrant communities examined here is a key aspect of their migratory experience, yet it is a dynamic field replete with opportunities to (re)shape individual paths and assign new meanings to migrant trajectories.

Transnational Migration as Opportunity for New Forms of Religiosity

One of the most illuminating recent academic attempts to examine the intersection of migration and religion was carried out over nearly a decade through a collaborative initiative funded by the Social Science Research Council of the United States, “The Religious Lives of Migrant Minorities”. The research program for the project coordinated by Josh DeWind and

Manuel Vasquez – with disciplinary training in migration and religion respectively – culminated in 2014 with the publication of a special issue of *Global Networks* that offered a balanced approach to understand the religious experiences of migrant communities. As DeWind and Vasquez explain in their introduction, from the migration studies perspective a focus on religion can shed light on “how migrants draw from religious beliefs, practices and institutions to insert themselves in transnational social fields” (2014, 255). From a religious studies perspective, seriously considering questions of settlement and adaptation in the context of migration can help us bypass abstract notions of religion that support unchanging beliefs and doctrines.

Their approach was to trace biographical trajectories that revealed continuities and transformations within the different migrant communities studied. However, the focus was mainly directed at how legal models for the administration of migrant populations and religion shaped different patterns of integration and identity formation, offering little attention to narratives of religious encounter and spiritual awakening.⁴ Although DeWind and Vasquez’s project was pioneering in conceiving religion in globalization in a more dynamic way, it only marginally incorporated into its research program those instances when migrants crossed religious boundaries, broke with the traditions of their communities, or attempted to reach out to other minorities. Nonetheless, their work constitutes a fundamental contribution to the growing literature that recognizes mobility, circulation, networks, and border-crossings, as concepts with increasing purchase in the study of the place of contemporary religion in the world of transnational migration. The chapters in this volume share similar theoretical underpinnings but advance the work in at least three major ways, which we go on to discuss below.

A special interest in crossing boundaries is the preeminent concern of the work by religious studies scholar Thomas Tweed (2006), who partly takes inspiration from Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “-scapes” (1996) to offer a framework for the study of mobile religious practices.⁵ Tweed is especially concerned with developing a methodological approach where religion can be “about movement and relation, and it is an attempt to correct theories that have presupposed stasis and minimized interdependence” (2006, 77). To

4 The chapter by Wong is the main exception, where she focuses on narratives of migration and how they are transformed.

5 In *Crossing and Dwelling* (Tweed 2006, 69), he defines religions as “confluences of organic channels and cultural currents that conjoin to create institutional networks that, in turn, prescribe, transmit, and transform tropes, beliefs, values, emotions, artifacts and rituals.”

infuse this notion into the study of religion in the globalized world, Tweed suggests the use of the term “sacrosapes” with the aim of highlighting the trails and landscapes that religious flows sketch as they transform the social arena (McAllister 2005). Tweed also makes use of hydraulic and spatial metaphors as necessary tools to understand transnational religion. While aquatic tropes help set religion in motion, spatial images reinforce the efforts of migrants to make symbolic homes in their places of dwelling.

But religion for Tweed is not only about finding one’s place in the world and in the universe, it is also fundamentally about *crossing* boundaries to reach one’s destination. He details different ways of crossing boundaries (terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic), which highlight the necessarily multi-layered understanding of religion and religious practice that he proposes. However, his theory’s explicit attempt to think of religion in terms of movement does not leave much room to consider the possibility that the interconnections that emerge from such a dynamic approach can also become critical, or even subversive, of one’s values and beliefs. Hence, while Tweed’s work is key to developing a non-sedentary theory of religion and useful in highlighting the notion that religions have the capacity to help migrants make new homes in new places, it does not adequately help us to understand how migratory itineraries can become gateways to new religious beliefs and practices.

In the context of this book, we take a somewhat inverse route: it is the experience of migration itself, and the concomitant exposure to new beliefs and modes of religiosity that this produces, that encourages people to think of spiritual interests and ambitions in a new light. The chapter by Horstmann directly engages with Tweed’s work and seeks to push his argument beyond the specific conditions of the Cuban diaspora to examine the challenges faced by Karen refugees who convert to Christianity. Religion enables these refugees to make new homes and build new lives after being forcibly displaced from their land, yet the religion that allows them to do this is not the one they brought from their former homes but the one they encountered through an American missionary family only after arriving in refugee camps. Moreover, the new source of identity and belonging is not made possible by their resettlement but by their engagement with a Christian-inspired organization that crosses back into Burmese territory to support freedom fighters with a supply of nurses and religious messages. Dwelling for Horstmann is a process that differs from the one proposed by Tweed, as it consists exclusively of the new affiliations and humanitarian activities that these refugees embark on. In this sense, it is also a highly mobile mode of religiosity where the main characteristic that unifies these

Christian freedom fighters is their willingness to leave all sense of spatial connection behind in pursuit of their mission. Gallo's chapter can also be read through the lens provided by Tweed's work, as Malayali men develop a sense of home in Italy only after religion generates a space of participation that exceeds spiritual and devotional commitments. It is thus the opportunity of taking decisions about the community's activities and projects that offers a space for individual fulfillment and the reinforcement of a masculine identity in the diaspora.

A second book that has influenced our current attempt at understanding the contemporary relationship between religion and migration is the volume entitled *Transnational Transcendence* (2009), edited by anthropologist Thomas Csordas. In his introduction to the volume, he asks the question, "What travels well?", remarking that it is important to focus on the means by which religions cross cultural and material borders, and highlighting that *mission* and *migration* are the two preeminent historical ways in which religions have traveled. But he also argues that contemporary *mediatization* and *mobility* are the dynamics that we need to examine to learn about globalized religion in the 21st century. He remarks that "to be distinguished from both overt missionization and the migration of populations is the *mobility* of individuals in the contemporary globalizing world" (Csordas 2009, 5). However, Csordas does not elaborate on the concept of mobility, suggesting that it is no more than a slightly updated version of migration.

The main implication of this characterization seems to be only that nineteenth-century missionary enterprises or the eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade transported religion differently from 21st-century homegrown Evangelical missionaries, labor migrants, and refugees. To be sure, ideological underpinnings, global political contexts, and forms of accumulation are dramatically different, but from such a stance contemporary mobility is different solely because it follows these epochal transformations. Beyond changes in technology that allow for a dramatic increase in speed in human transport and digital communications, Csordas does not envisage mobility to open up a new methodological approach to the study of religion.

This notwithstanding Csordas develops a very useful framework to approach transnational religion that is taken up and modified in this volume by Lucia and Pathirage. Religious *portable practices* for Csordas are "rites that can be easily learned, require little esoteric knowledge or paraphernalia, are not held as proprietary or necessarily linked to a specific cultural context, and can be performed without commitment to an elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus" (2009, 4). Both Lucia and Pathirage take Csordas's concept of *portable practice* as the starting

point for their respective analyses of globalized yoga practitioners in the United States and the daily dynamics of a Buddhist temple in Australia. Their work pushes the concept in new directions by showing that although portability is key to the contemporary mobility of these religious practices, they are not simply reproduced intact in different locations. Lucia further shows that the motivations behind the migration of yoga differ widely, ranging from the nationalist goals of those who exported yoga a century ago to America, to the more business- and humanitarian-oriented aims of contemporary American yogis. Pathirage's focus on the *Katina* ritual and *Dharma Desana* events at the Theravada Buddhist temple in Darwin highlight that portability cannot be taken as a characteristic of the entire ritual but is a condition that allows for the ritual to be partially reproduced in different locations. Adaptability is thus presented as a key component for the portability and mobility of religious practices.⁶

Finally, a third body of scholarship that we briefly refer to in this introduction is the work of Manuel Vasquez (2008, 2011) who departs from the metaphors proposed by Tweed and the general interest in mobility suggested by Csordas to highlight the important role that networks can have for the study of religion and mobility. Although Vasquez endorses Tweed's hydrodynamic theory of religion (2011, 289-90), he aims to further develop aspects of the theory that remain problematic. In particular, Vasquez argues that while the aquatic metaphors proposed by Tweed are useful in visualizing the fluidity of religion, they often fail to acknowledge the persistence of relatively rigid structures and borders that determine the paths of mobility that religious communities, specialists, and objects actually traverse. Bringing into conversation religious studies scholars with geographers and spatial theorists, Vasquez argues that it is necessary to ethnographically study the richness of everyday religious practices of migrant communities and congregations, while locating their "material practices within translocal religious and nonreligious flows and processes" (2011, 291).

Studies of religion and migration have been mainly interested in the use of religion by migrants who feel alienated from their communities of origin and turn toward religious institutions in search of an instrument for moral and cultural orientations. Such models of religion that emphasize its fixed and stable features have contributed to interpreting religious participation

6 Dean's chapter in this volume further shows that even when portability connects two temples in a direct way, this should not be interpreted as enabling the reproduction of some essential and authentic ritual form. In fact, connections can be highly localized without reproducing any standardized or normative religious practice.

as providing an “anchor and compass” that orients migrant workers in the context of transnationalism, but as Vasquez has noted, “it is a modernist prejudice to see religion as essentially static” (2008, 157).

Dean’s work on Chinese networks in Southeast Asia is helpful in filling the gap between the theories of Csordas and Vasquez, as the portability of Daoist practices carried in a trunk packed with talismans, incense, and statues that relocated the power of the gods to the diasporic destinations of overseas Chinese merchants, was also key to the development of trust nodes in these complex financial and commercial networks. In reference to the over-abundance of the concept of networks in the literature, Vasquez insightfully notes a critique by Vertovec (2003), who remarks that the concept of networks says very little about the nature of relations. For this reason, the focus placed by Dean on the circulation of religious artifacts is important to put flesh on the bones of network theories and invites researchers concerned with the functioning of religious networks to zoom in on the specific material dynamics of these modes of translocative interconnectedness.

The concept of networks as developed by Vasquez thus provides a unique methodological resource because it encourages researchers to be aware of the fact that flows often underplay the importance of place and the highly unequal freedom of movement that different religious denominations have. The combination of religious affiliation with the passport used by a prospective migrant has a dramatic impact on the freedom of mobility that he or she has. As Vasquez puts it, “networks mark relatively stable but always contested differentials of power, of inclusion and exclusion, of cooperation and conflict, of boundary-crossing and boundary-making” (2008, 169). Indeed, by tracing the historical development of diasporic Chinese networks, Dean also helps us to envision the highly unequal experience of mobility and the myriad interests that converge in the establishment of overseas trust networks. Finally, Vignato’s ethnography examines the question of how Hindu rituals in Sumatra rekindle an identity that is traced to the ancestral land, while at the same time their performative dimensions produce different meanings once removed from Tamil Nadu and situated in the context of ethno-nationalist politics in contemporary Indonesia.

Conclusion: Why Asia?

Peter van der Veer has noted that religious migrants are commonly seen as conservative at best, and as terrorists at worst (2002, 103). This is especially the case when the focus is placed on Asian migrants as part of the movement

of populations arriving in Europe and North America. The literature that approaches transnational religion in a more nuanced way – which we have briefly explored in this Introduction – has concentrated almost exclusively on Christian denominations and their movement from Latin America into the United States (Phan & Padilla 2015). The work of Thomas Tweed, Manuel Vasquez, and Thomas Csordas are all examples of this more creative approach to transnational religion that has generated a series of conceptual tools to study the religious practices of migrant communities away from the more geopolitical and ideological concerns of 21st-century globalization. One of the main objectives of this book is therefore to examine what these concepts can do to help us understand migrant religiosity amongst Asian communities.

This volume aims to propose an alternative approach to examine the dynamics of religious mobility emphasizing the important work of networks and material circulation in the formation of religious communities across borders. As Courtney Bender, Wendy Cadge, Peggy Levitt, & David Smilde remark, “religious bodies, objects and ideas, leave from and travel to particular national contexts, but they do so through transnational networks, organizations and movements” (2012, 5). Bringing together perspectives from different Asian religious traditions, we examine the worlds that are created by religious workers, objects, and ideas when circulating around the world; and by directing the research lens toward aspects of mobility, we draw on contemporary scholarship that questions traditional patterns that conceive of stability as norm versus movement as exception. This book hence creates space to explore how different Asian communities pursue religious responsibilities and encounter new forms of religiosity when unfastened from local settings, emphasizing the multiple ways in which transnational migrants find avenues of spirituality that address the concerns of highly mobile populations in ways that traditional religious practice cannot.

In sum, the main contribution of *Asian Migrants and Religious Experience* is to build a case for the importance of highlighting that religion in the context of migration is able to, not only maintain, but also *generate* new social and cultural dynamics that can impact the lives of receiving communities. Regardless of how specific populations across Asia have come to embrace a particular religious faith, it is no longer possible to speak of “sending” and “receiving” communities. New strategies are created and implemented not only to reach out to members of the community, but are increasingly developed with new audiences in mind. In this way, probably the most important connecting thread that brings together our chapters

is the emphasis that migrants place not in preserving their religious values and traditions, but the efforts they make to share their spirituality with others, migrants and nonmigrants alike.

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