

Commentary: South Korean Factory Managers' Transnational Life in Ho Chi Minh City by Chae Suhong

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The article, "South Korean Factory Managers' Transnational Life in Ho Chi Minh City," written by Chae Suhong, discusses the concept of transnationalism based on the lives of South Korean (hereafter, Korean) managers working in and around Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his well-written and clearly structured article, Chae presents a complex analysis of (1) movements of Korean skilled and managerial migrant workers to Vietnam; (2) their socio-economic status affected by political and economic conditions of both the country of origin and the host country; and (3) their transnational lives, specifically in their transnational work and living spaces.

I agree with the author that research on the transnational lives of high-skilled migrants is an issue hardly dealt with in the literature, due to emphases in migration studies on theorizing policies of both sending and receiving countries that govern migrant workers and on understanding the precarity of low-skilled migrant workers. The author does not follow these trends nor does he accept the mainstream approaches that focus on determinants of mobility, migrants' adaptability to host societies, or effects of migration on sending and receiving countries as well as on migrants themselves. Building on research by others recognizing the economic push and pull factors in migration, Chae turns to an emphasis on the

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socioeconomic lives of Korean migrants in Vietnam. He analyzes impacts of political and economic conditions in South Korea and Vietnam for obtaining jobs and shaping the transnational lives of Korean managerial workers in Vietnam. Thus, the author is able to show how political and economic contexts affect the social and economic status of different groups of Korean managers with important implications for understanding their cross-cultural experiences and transnational ways of life. Given the fact that the author explores a new research area, the valuable thick description he delivers is an important scientific contribution to migration studies and beyond.

Chae begins his article by positioning the relevance of his academic interest within the larger field of transnational studies and particularly Korean international labor migration, then develops his conceptual approach to the interpretation and analysis of empirical material. Chae adopts the concept of transnationalism to explore the lives of Korean managerial workers in Vietnam in the process expanding the scope of research toward interconnected sociocultural domains. Incorporating a historical approach as well allows the author to show how changing political and economic conditions in the home country as well as the host country have influenced not only the possibilities for finding and obtaining jobs in Vietnam, patterns of working and living while abroad, and the lives of return migrants in South Korea, but the future of Korean factory managers in Ho Chi Minh City.

The theoretical orientation to Chae's article is followed by a section on methods. He argues that multi-layered and multi-sited methodology is the most apt framework and research strategy. Thus, the nature of the research process is unfolded in a detailed and transparent way fulfilling criteria for qualitative research. The ethnographic evidence provided in the article is path-breaking and original; it provides evidence on socioeconomic status and transnational lives of different groups of managerial migrants, namely resident managers, factory managers, self-employed managers, and others.

Based on qualitative material drawn from observations and interviews conducted in Vietnam since 2008, the author provides readers with a fascinating picture of the transnational lives of Korean factory managers. The empirical data allow the author to create realistic images of everyday lives in well-organized fashion. The inclusion of various problems in the analysis such as double-bound class consciousness and contradictions in localization as well as ethnic conflict and mystification of class

consciousness in transnational workplaces makes the analysis of Korean managers' lives in transnational workplaces particularly rich and relevant. Similarly, differentiation among local living options, socioeconomic reproduction, long distance caregiving, and sentiments among members of Korean managers' transnational families are explored in the analysis.

Given the facts that an increasing number of Korean managers look favorably on the possibility of marrying a Vietnamese woman and that managerial workers face growing challenges in seeking jobs similar to those they hold in Vietnam after their return to South Korea, the possibility of settling permanently with a Vietnamese wife and mixed-race children in Vietnam could have been more fully considered. I suggest the author develop a more nuanced analysis with respect to settlement strategies of different groups of migrant managers, including those married to Vietnamese. In addition, I would like to ask the author to consider gender, as a social category, in his analyses of transnational life of Korean managerial migrants. In terms of gender it is important to understand the effect of Korean culture on the accessibility and obtaining of jobs as Korean managerial workers and to understand further the differentiation between male and female migrants in performing their responsibilities in workplaces and their obligations in transnational family life. Gender does not get reflected throughout the article but is only mentioned briefly at a few points where the author discusses difficulties for male managers in dealing with female workers in factories and the labor division in the family in which men are obligated to be the breadwinner while women are responsible for looking after the family and the children's education. Still, a more penetrating analysis of how gender matters in the workplace would be revealing.

In conclusion, this is an important and interesting topic—the transnational lives of highly-skilled migrant workers. The unpacking of impacts of political and economic conditions on social and economic status and consequently on the transnational lives of Korean managers in Ho Chi Minh City makes an important contribution to the academic literature on international labor migration and creates a foundation for future research to continue to deepen understanding of the processes and circumstances involved.