Migration and Technologies in Contexts of Uncertainty

SASKIA WITTEBORN

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Thank you very much for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to talk to you today. My talk centers on the topic of migration and technologies in spaces of impermanence, transit spaces in particular. Eventually, this talk is about uncertainty, the main theme of the Winter School. The talk is also a snapshot of a larger research project, already published papers (e.g., Witteborn, 2019, 2020), and papers in progress, which examine transit as a space of practices, including technology and data practices.

As a communication and migration researcher, I've been working with migrants and forced migrants since the year 2000 on three continents. I started in the United States where I looked at the (re)creation of Arab American identities before and after 9/11. I have worked in Hong Kong and Germany on questions of technology practices and transnational and forced migration and have started exploring culturally grounded notions of information and data privacy. There were 79.5 million forcibly displaced people globally in 2019, according to the UNHCR (https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html), the majority of which were internally displaced persons (45.7 million), followed by refugees (26 million), and asylum seekers (4.2 million). And there are other migrants, such as poor labor migrants, who circulate in transit spaces with limited political and legal rights, such as the right to become a permanent resident. Transit is a lived reality of many migrants, and it is increasingly structured by technology; a point I will further expand on in the talk. Transit is composed of social, economic, technological, legal, and political practices (compare Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), which in turn create spaces, in which people and things are calibrated to be moved upon demand (Brewer & Yükseker, 2005; Collyer et al., 2012).

In the following, I identify practices and actors creating transit space[4], based on Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) discussion of migration infrastructure. The example I use is Hong Kong where I live and work. In particular, I show how asylum seekers and migrant domestic workers use technology in romantic relationships on the geographical and social fringes of society without being able to emplace themselves; always living in the temporality of anticipated geographical, social, and personal change which can be indefinitely deferred.

HONG KONG AS A CASE

Hong Kong is a space of transit. For people and things, this has been a place and space of passing, from colonial masters making their imprint on the social structure, language, and people, eventually handing over the territory to the PRC, Vietnamese refugees arriving after the Vietnam War in the 1970s, many to be resettled in the U.S., Australia, and Europe (Chan & Loveridge, 1987), and skilled migrants from Mainland China and other countries making short and long-term use of the business-friendly environment of Hong Kong SAR. Goods are passed daily through the 6th largest container port in the world (World Shipping Council, 2018). Hong Kong Special Administrative Region sits on the axis of South-South and South-North migrations and is an important place to understand the movement of people and objects. Although (and maybe because) this wealthy city is a city of refugees - with an estimate of up to one million Mainland Chinese fleeing across the border from the 1950s onwards due to famine, persecution, and the Cultural Revolution (Chen, 2010) - Hong Kong has not signed the Geneva Refugee Convention from

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[4] I use *space* in the singular and plural here. The legal, economic, social, humanitarian, and technology actors and practices making up transit space can produce variants of this space.

1951. Until 2014, claims were processed by the UNHCR. Since then, the Unified Screening Mechanism has been introduced, a regulatory mechanism through which the Immigration Department selects affirmative non-refoulement cases, with refugee recognition and resettlement still being processed by the UNHCR. People seeking asylum come from South and Southeast Asia, African nations, and fewer from the Middle East or North Africa, depending on the political situation. But despite being a city with a pronounced refugee history, the percentage of people gaining refugee status is below one percent; one of the lowest in the world (Justice Center Hong Kong, n.d., https://www.justicecentre.org.hk).

If a claim is rejected by the Immigration Department, the person can turn to the Torture Claims Appeals Board, the Court of Appeal and Final Appeal. Even if a refugee claim is approved, the person might still have to wait for years to be resettled. Registered refugees can apply for a work permit with the Immigration Department. Typical jobs are in the hospitality or cleaning industry (bars, kitchens, hotels). The majority of non-refoulement claimants, however, do not have work permits and are dependent on social welfare support for housing, utilities, transport, and food coupons.

The data presented in this talk were collected through grant-funded research on transit space and communication from 2016 to 2017 and pilot studies leading up to the approval of the grant. The corpus is based on a selective sample of personal interviews with asylum seekers and CAT claimants from Pakistan. The corpus also includes participant observations in private homes of the asylum seekers. The interviewees were predominantly male. The interviews were conducted in English, Cantonese, and Urdu as those were the main languages the interviewees were comfortable with. I can provide more information on methodology during our discussion.

Within the given time, I will give you a snapshot on how asylum seekers built romantic relationships through technology in the transit space of Hong Kong. I hope to demonstrate how mobile technologies in particular enable connectivity and intimate relationality between migrants on the fringes of a geographical and social space. Transit space is impermanent space for those moving in it, thickened by legal, economic, social, and political practices. And yet, people emplace themselves and leave their traces, making creative use of the opportunities transit space offers but also bearing the burden of living in a state and space of flux.

TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE AND SPACES

Transit spaces are composed of regulatory (the law), economic (smugglers, traffickers, informal economy), humanitarian (e.g., UNHCR), social network (displaced migrants, diasporas), and technological actors and practices; borrowing the dimensions of migration infrastructure from Xiang and Lindquist (2014). Transit agents and practices bounce the migrant back and forth between immigration offices, the UNHCR, NGOs, and diasporic networks, anonymizing her in the process through imposition of asylum and refugee categories, decoupling the human from subjectivities important to her or him. Periods of rush, such as going to collect the monthly allowance, taking English classes with local NGOs, or joining church or mosque services, are replaced by periods of dragging slowness, meeting friends in air-conditioned malls or just lying on the bed, before being called by a social worker to confirm that a negative asylum decision has been made, starting the cycle anew.

Infrastructure communicates something about society, its politics, economics, and histories. It has a poetic function (Jakobson, 1985; Larkin, 2013). This poetics tells us whether a city wants to be seen as smart, as globally connected, or as producing modern citizens, among other things (Von Schnitzler, 2008; Schaub, 2012). The poetic function of transit infrastructure and space is impermanence. Impermanence becomes the political anchor to "produce governable mobile subjects from ungovernable flows" (Panagiotidis & Tsianos, 2007, p. 82). The law keeps the asylum seeker in check (e.g., no right to work, minimum social welfare support), while humanitarian agents like NGOs, religious institutions, and pro bono actors attempt to making life liveable in the transit space of Hong Kong, providing advice on health and the law, conducting skills classes, organizing sports activities, and creating spaces for religious communion. Legal and political restrictions bloat migrants with notions of too much – poverty and boredom, physical and psychological challenges, and uncertainty. Legal conditions for asylum seekers (e.g., being resettled as a recognized refugee and not having the right to stay) have grown out of the historical conditions of Hong Kong, as explained before, and a collective memory of poverty and survival in overcrowded spaces. This history and a resulting legal culture keep migrants marginalized migrants in the agony of biographical and sociocultural richness and the forceful silencing of this richness through categorial impositions (compare Fanon, 1967). Examples for these categories are *the refugee* or *the maid,* as the commonly used English term for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.

This history and a resulting legal culture keep marginalized migrants.
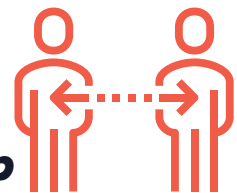
While impermanence contains the notion of non-place, it metacommunicates generative potential. Asylum seekers, CAT claimants, and the few recognized refugees in the larger corpus of the study de-categorized themselves as *asylum seeker* and positioned themselves on social media and in city life as artists or musicians (unpaid), volunteers, or romantic partners to escape rigid ascriptions and scripts. The people slipped out of imposed categories and gestured towards new ways of subjectification, thereby highlighting their

needs, such as the need to be mobile, the need to work, and the need for intimacy. Migrant domestic workers were one group asylum seekers interacted with to satisfy the need for intimacy and aspirational mobility (Witteborn, 2019).

Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are predominantly women from the Philippines and Indonesia, followed by Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bangladesh, Madagascar, and Cambodia (Association of Hong Kong Agencies for Migrant Workers Limited, 2017). While women are married with family in the home countries, there are also many single young women. Their social status in the city is relatively low as is the status of asylum seekers. In Hong Kong, the minimum allowable wage for migrant domestic workers is HKD 4630 per month (as of 2019). Employers have to provide accommodation, free food, and free return passage upon termination of contract (Government of Hong Kong, n.d.). There were 352.000 migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong in 2016 (called Foreign Domestic Helpers[5] in the census cited), comprising 9.3% of the workforce and 11% of the local households, according to the latest available census data (https://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1617rb04-foreign-domestic-helpers-and-evolving-care-duties-in-hong-kong-20170720-e.pdf). Domestic workers' duties are childcare, cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, and taking care of the elderly. Although the wage is 2-3 times higher than in the Philippines or Indonesia, and although the wage contributes to the remittance flow back to the countries of birth, the income relative to working hours and unpaid overtime has been regularly criticized. A study by the Research Centre on Migration and Mobility at Chinese University of Hong Kong (https://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press_detail) found that almost 62% of the sample of 2000 women said that they worked between 13-16 hours a day. Only 42 percent had their own room. The others slept in childrens' bedrooms, on balconies, bathrooms, and in kitchens. Twenty-five percent of the women had a university education. Physical and verbal violence, bonded labor, shortage of food, and lack of private spaces have been topics discussed by the media, and are repeatedly addressed by local Hong Kong NGOs and activist organizations lobbying for better working conditions. Migrant domestic workers are made invisible as a person by being assigned a serving class status, which is reflected in the term *maid*. Like the domestic workers, asylum seekers experience marginalization, according to interviewees in this study, with locals changing seats on buses and the subway, police asking for papers in the streets, and the media mentioning asylum seekers in contexts of petty crime and illegal immigration.

DIGITAL RELATING ON THE FRINGES

Social networks act as catalysts for diasporic clustering, for economic opportunity, and as anchors for local sociality. Asylum seekers linked with other migrants on the socio-economic fringes, entering romantic relationships that were dictated by impermanence. The mobile phone became an important circuit to navigate this impermanence and the associated uncertainty about

the daily life of the couples and making a home in Hong Kong for the time being. Moreover, mobile technologies enabled bursts of intimate energy but also sociocultural instability through a reversal of gender roles and challenged cultural expectations. Here are some examples.

> "I am no man here and have to beg from my girlfriend. My father and brothers would be ashamed"

Asylum seekers tended to meet domestic workers in the parks of Hong Kong on Sundays. Due to a lack of physical space, the women have to head out on their day off and gather in public spaces: in parks, under bridges, flyovers, and on beaches. During rainy or cold weather, the women can be seen huddled under blankets in corners of bridges and under protective roofs, sitting on cardboards, playing games, sleeping, eating, and chatting. Bilal[6] had met Rachel in one of those locations. Several months into the relationship, Rachel had given Bilal a monthly allowance to top up his SIM card (compare Witteborn, 2019). He had brought the mobile phone from Pakistan where he had to leave for political reasons, as he put it. But the financial support of Bilal soured the relationship after several months, with Bilal hearing more frequently from Rachel that her friends received financial support from boyfriends. This message hurt Bilal. He started to feel "bad," as he expressed it. "I am no man here and have to beg from my girlfriend. My father and brothers would be ashamed," he said. Moreover, Rachel retreated, did not answer her phone when he called and started seeing more of her girlfriends on her only day off. Bilal felt he was losing her.

He started to accept odd jobs, such as on e-waste sites in the neighborhood. He wanted to feel independent, buy some small gifts for his girlfriend, and maybe even move out of the dilapidated house he had to share with other asylum seekers. The opportunity became known to him by word-of-mouth, through locals as well as diasporic networks. Dangerous work was awaiting him, taking apart and sorting plastics and metals, while being paid low wages. This observation is similar to Vecchio's (2016) research on asylum seekers and the informal economy in Hong Kong.

As a background context, I need to mention that Hong Kong has developed into a main receiving place for electronic waste (e-waste) after China restricted those imports.

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[6] I use the name *migrant domestic* workers as the people are more than *helpers* and as the term *foreign* contributes to binary ascriptions of cultural, racial, and ethnic belonging. Many local NGOs as well as transnational migrant organizations use the term *migrant domestic worker*.

[7] All names changed.

E-waste in East and Southeast Asia had risen substantially by 2015 (63%), reaching 12.3 million metric tons (Bhattacharya, January 27, 2017). Forty percent of containers coming to the port of Hong Kong are said to carry scrap materials, e-waste included. What's more, by 2015 Hong Kong had generated around 21 kilos of e-waste per person which was a higher per capita waste than China at the time. Of the 70.000 tons produced per annum in Hong Kong itself, 80% was redistributed to places in Africa or Southeast Asia, where it fed local informal businesses (Standaert, August 26, 2017). With China having decided to reject more e-waste being imported into the country and with Guangdong province closing down its toxic dumping grounds which provided work for the poor, Hong Kong had become a main e-waste receiver in the region at the time of the research.

ELECTRONIC WASTE
70.000 tons produced per annum in Hong Kong

Dozens of iron-gated recycling sites are located in the New Territories of Hong Kong, close to the Chinese border, on land zoned for agriculture, which means in close proximity to organic and fish farms. Until 2017, the sector had been largely unregulated and plastics burnt without regulation, including plastics from monitors, printers, computers, and washing machines. By the end of 2018, Hong Kong's Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Treatment and Recycling Facility in Tuen Mun was to end those unregulated practices, with recyclers needing a license for their work and to operate on land zoned for industrial use (Standaert, August 26, 2017 https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2108339/welcome-hong-kong-worlds-dumping-ground-electronic-waste).

Some people seeking asylum lived in villages close to the old recycling sites due to the cheap rent. This was a rural part of Hong Kong, known for its modest household income as well as junkyards dotting the roads. Old village houses with tin roofs and walls stained by black mold were guarded by stray dogs. Abandoned lots gave way to high grass with white cranes wading in the lush greenery; the Shenzhen skyline glittering in the distance. Men like Bilal tended to share the old village houses with other asylum seekers, which meant a small corridor and a basic cooking facility, a room for each person, and a shared shower and toilet. The rooms contained a bed, table, chairs, and some posters on the walls. The mobile phones laying on the beds or tables were predominantly Chinese brands. Digital technologies were important for the migrants. So Bilal bought Rachel a nice cover for her phone from the money he had saved and himself more data. Now, he could communicate frequently with her through video chat and live-streams.

Overall, asylum seekers had to sit idly or organize illegal, dangerous work in the informal sector as they were not allowed to work. Their girlfriends were reachable only via their phone and mainly through texting during their long working hours. The digital device bridged temporal and experiential asynchronies and enabled the couples to participate in each other's lives through regular textual updates. While asylum seekers would spend their most productive years without meaningful tasks and in waiting, domestic workers were under pressure to cope with the long hours and heavy physical work as well as higher physical mobility than their partners, accompanying people they worked for in the city but also for travel abroad. These differences in daily experiences are exemplary of transit where body and mind, daily rhythms, and mobility in social spaces are out of equilibrium. The digital device became the tool through which an equilibrium could be achieved – if only momentarily - through intimate communicative acts, such as encouragement, making jokes, sending emojis, and pictures of people and places (compare Witteborn, 2019). But the digital device also became a symbol for sticky gender roles which were revised in the transit space of Hong Kong. Finances, cultural expectations, and temporalities clashed. The women had more financial and social capital than the men, while the men could not be expected to make a stable living as someone being in the process of seeking asylum. The women had only two weeks to find a new job, in case the previous one was terminated. For both, transit and a life in impermanence were a socio-economic and political reality and made it difficult to emplace themselves.

Men in the process of seeking asylum also met women on dating apps (compare Witteborn, 2019, 2020). Hamid lived in the rural parts of Hong Kong and was a young man from Pakistan seeking asylum in Hong Kong. During a visit, he showed me his Facebook page and a picture of his girlfriend Surya on a hiking trail. After their first contact on a dating app, they met on a Sunday in a park together with friends. While dating apps are a popular medium for finding a partner in other demographics, for asylum seekers interviewed in this study, they were key. In embodied life, the men's presence in parks on Sundays could give cues about their political status in Hong Kong as well as their economic situation. South Asian middle class residents would cluster in different parts of Hong Kong with their families. Hence, contacting women on dating apps with a curated profile increased the chances of meeting them in person.

Like many others, Surya worked a 12-hour day and often only got off at 10pm as she had to make dinner and clean for a family of four. Like Rachel, Surya had given Hamid a mobile phone which she had bought in a second-hand mall. The couple used the phone for WhatsApp texting and a

few video calls, with Facebook being another important platform for documenting the relationship. "The phone is my home. I show my liking for her (chuckling), we eat together, and tell each other about our days," Hamid said. Watching turned into monitoring. Surya texted Hamid several times during the day, asking about his whereabouts. She wanted it to be a serious relationship and became suspicious when Hamid did not answer. Hamid, on the other hand, became annoyed with the texts, answering late in the evening, with Surya already worrying about him having been hurt on the busy roads or having bad news from immigration.

Couples like Hamid and Surya would sit together on Sundays, chatting about their weekly experiences, including Hamid telling Surya how he had been stopped by police, how he had to walk as the transport money had run out or how he spent the day in bed as he was too bored or tired to get up. But sad they did not want to be on their only day together, giving even more power to the system that kept them in loops of uncertainty and in limbo. So the couple chose to go on picnics in parks, sitting with others on the lawn and under flyovers, spreading out a plastic sheet on which to put the food and drinks. They also went hiking or to the beaches, watching from the shore as neither person knew how to swim. The couples understood that they would never get permanent citizenship in Hong Kong (Community Legal Information Centre Hong Kong, 2017). The persons' lives were defined by impermanence; the feeling of never being at home, never emplaced. And yet, this position produced excess: the excess of intimacy, feeling attached to and admired by someone, a position being diligently portrayed on Facebook by posting pictures. For both people, this excess was a stimulant to get through daily work life or daily boredom.

But transit and its legal and political practices also made excess dangerous and affected lives in dramatic ways. Like Rachel, Surya was afraid of pregnancy. Hamid told me during an interview that Surya's friend, an Indonesian domestic worker, had become pregnant by an asylum seeker and had to make the decision to give away her newborn for adoption. Her family did not know as she was afraid of bringing shame to them and not being able to marry. Moral laws were strict in her village. Hence, the pregnant woman had deleted all pictures of herself on Facebook so that the family back home would not see any changes in her physique. Even more, the boyfriend had been reluctant to commit to the pregnancy and baby, being afraid of making the legal and mental burden of transit life hereditary. The conditions of transit hit the couple with full force, turning intimate into destructive excess, eventually leading to a break-up and the dispersal of three lives.

The examples drive home an important point. The infrastructure that keeps asylum seekers in transit creates spaces of encounter, especially between those who are marginalized. Many of the men in this study felt emasculated and yet could revert into more traditional gender roles through dangerous work in the informal economy at the price of possible detention. Excess of human life met on the fringes of the city and created human bonds between cultural and economic Others. Social networks remained provisional and yet appealing in their amorphous nature, producing moments of intimate emplacement as well as intense isolation.

IMPLICATIONS

Transit infrastructure sorts, categorizes, and clears the forced migrant while selectively including the person into a precarious labor force and social relations at the fringes of society (see Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Transit infrastructure and impermanence are disruptive on many levels. The supposedly governable subject becomes ungovernable through actors and practices active in transit infrastructure (compare Panagiotidis & Tsianos, 2007), including the local economy, which uses migrants as cheap labor. This sector, however, provides the means through which people in transit can earn some money to support family, pepare for future resettlement, and emplace themselves in intimate relationships. At the same time, those relationships are in danger of being destroyed by transit infrastructural practices, and the impermanence and uncertainty thus produced. Moreover, technology can act as an enabler of social networking but is also linked to surveillance. The displaced are data producers on social media platforms and elsewhere, and those data can be used by legal entities for case processing (Brekke & Balke Staver, 2019; Witteborn, 2020).

But transit and impermanence also have generative potential. The migrant is an actor who uses the unexpected opportunities produced by transit infrastructure to make life and a living. Mobile devices and digital technologies as well as social networks enabled a sense of connectivity and normalcy for the people introduced in this talk. Interpersonal and intergroup power relations were challenged and changed. Migrant domestic workers reversed their being at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy in Hong Kong in romantic relationships with asylum seekers. Male forced migrants had to negotiate cultural role expectations. In brief, transit infrastructure and the spaces it produces is a frame to understand the intricate tensions between a subject who desires physical, digital, and social mobility and the local and global structures that make this mobility an intermittent, unpredictable, and fractured process. Thank you for your attention.

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