‘Ethnic capital’ and ‘flexible citizenship’ in unfavourable legal contexts: stepwise migration of the Korean Chinese within and beyond northeast Asia

Abstract

This article examines how migrants mobilise ethnicity for migration purposes by drawing on the migration trajectories of ethnic Korean migrants from northeast China (Korean Chinese) – through various steppingstone countries, including South Korea – to the U.S. I focus on how regulatory authorities, various intermediaries, and aspiring migrants interact over the valorisation, conversion, and legitimisation of what I call ‘ethnic capital’. Drawing on ethnographic field research in China, South Korea, and the U.S., I show how multiple manifestations of ethnic capital – coethnic networks, Korean proficiency, perceived phenotypical affinities, kinship relations with South Korean citizens, and derivatively, South Korean citizenship/passports (obtained legally or illegally) – facilitate Korean Chinese stepwise migration. I also examine how the differential endowment of migration-facilitating capital (including ethnic capital) produces fine-grained material and symbolic stratification in the sending community and identify the distinctive moral economy that informs Korean Chinese navigation of global mobility regimes. By illuminating the strategies of capital-constrained migrants facing policy contexts markedly different from the much-studied European cases, this article highlights the contested process through which ethnicity is turned into migration-facilitating capital, expands our inquiry on the ‘flexible citizenship’ practices beyond the jet-setting managerial class, and deepens our comparative understanding of ethnic affinity migration and external citizenship.
Bio
Jaeeun Kim is Assistant Professor of Sociology and the Korea Foundation Assistant Professor of Korean Studies at the University of Michigan. She studies race/ethnicity/nationalism and international migration and citizenship from a comparative and transnational perspective. Kim is the author of multiple articles and an award-winning book Contested Embrace: Transborder Membership Politics in Twentieth-Century Korea (Stanford University Press, 2016). Kim was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study during 2016-2017.

Building S, Room 901, CAULFIELD CAMPUS
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2:30 – 3:15 pm

All are welcome!
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