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Pensioners on the move: social security and trans-border retirement migration in Asia and Europe

Established migration theories have long asserted international migration to be a venture of the young and healthy. The workshop ‘Pensioners on the Move’, however, focused on another group exhibiting quite different migratory behaviour: they do not move from low-income to high-income countries but vice versa; they don’t move to work, but to not work. This mobility is neither tourism nor migration, but shares elements of both.

O dd as it may seem, the movement of pensioners across international borders is on the rise in both Asia and Europe. While there is a growing literature on this topic in Europe, particularly on intra-EU movement, the trend in Asia has only just begun to receive academic attention. The workshop brought together scholars from East and Southeast Asia and Europe, to review experiences in Europe, explore developments in Asia, and deepen our general understanding of the new migration trend through comparison. Seventeen papers were presented, covering pensioners who migrated as a result of reunification policies (Russian Jews to Germany); retired labour migrants who moved back to their home countries (Turkish and Moroccan elderly from Europe); and most significantly, pensioners from wealthy countries seeking a better retirement life (Japanese to Southeast Asia, Singaporeans to Australia, Europeans to southern Europe).

It’s not just about ageing

The workshop opened with presentations by demographers who identified the root cause of pensioners’ mobility. In countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the pace of ageing is even faster than it has been in most European countries. In Japan, for example, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over is projected to rise from 15% in 2005 to 28% in 2034. While more people are getting older, fewer elderly live with their children. This trend began in Europe, but wealthier Asian countries are quickly catching up. In Japan, the percentage of persons aged 65 and over living with children fell from 77% to 52% between 1970 and 1997; in South Korea, from over 86% in 1978 to 49% in 2000. There are many reasons for this: pensioners today have fewer children, fewer daughters-in-law care for elders and national pension schemes – though far from generous – make it possible for the elderly to live independently. All of which created more potentially mobile pensioners. With the baby boomer generation approaching retirement and Elspeth Guild

Manipulators or victims?

It is clear that pensioners migrate because of differences in income levels and purchasing power between their own and other countries. But how exactly do the elderly make the decision to migrate? Sometimes to a place where they have never lived! What does it mean to them to migrate to a new country where they cannot, at such a late stage of life, communicate in their own language? The picture becomes complex when we look at individual stories; seeing migrant pensioners as either manipulators of state policies or victims of insufficient social security in the home country can be simplistic. For some, migration is an escape from hardship; for others the fulfillment of a lifelong dream; some suffer from isolation in the new country, others paradoxically improve their family relations as a result of moving away; some prefer short stays, others are ready to die in the new place. The movement of pensioners is also a gendered phenomenon, though the gender bias seems to be more salient in Asia than in Europe. For example, a high percentage of single males is found among Thailand’s Japanese elderly.

A number of papers also pointed to the importance of class divisions. In both Europe and Asia, pensioners’ migration was initially an option for high income groups, though this has changed recently. Different groups appear to have different incentives and behaviour. Among the Japanese retirees, for example, the affluent chose the best place to live after traveling to various countries, while low-income earners moved directly to Southeast Asia out of economic need. In Europe, affluent British or German pensioners move to places such as Tuscany, while the less well-off go to Spain and, increasingly, to countries outside the EU. Different income groups also relate differently to the destination community. Affluent migrants seem to be better integrated, both because they are more likely to speak foreign languages and because they tend to live in individual houses dispersed across communities, rather than living in congregated residences (for example, gated communities) that are more popular with middle-income groups.

Social implications

What does the increasing mobility of pensioners mean to the receiving communities? The coming of pensioners certainly brings in new income, which may improve national health services and in turn spread services to the larger population. Unlike tourists, migrant pensioners remain in a community and fuel the local economy instead of spending on foreign-owned hotels and tour operators. But there is also evidence that the migration of pensioners siphons off medical resources in the receiving community and has negative impacts on health equity, particularly for lower classes and rural populations. The loss of skilled health professionals from the public medical sector can be significant. In Europe, too, as pensioners tend to migrate to certain regions, they may strain already limited resources. Other social implications include the globalisation of the health care work force and the emergence of a transnational care industry. At the local level, some migrant pensioners work as volunteers in the host society, which not only keeps them healthy but helps integrate their ethnic communities (including non-pensioners) into mainstream society. Some workshop participants were critical of the congregated residential pattern common to migrant pensioners in Europe and Asia, believing it reflects and reinforces unequal international relations.

The three-day workshop concluded with a field trip to Penang, Malaysia, where participants observed retirement communities first-hand. Throughout the workshop, lively comparative discussions revealed that the subject has still greater theoretical potential. Though we all enjoyed the meeting, we depart quite humbly by the holes in our knowledge. Our pendulum was swinging: we were migrating back home to more work.

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Southeast Asian Studies
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