Infrastructures of insecurity: Housing and language testing in Asia-Australia migration

Shanthi Robertson

Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Building EM Parramatta South Campus, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how migration infrastructure conditions migrant mobilities within receiving states. The paper examines two infrastructural case studies, language testing and housing markets, in relation to Asian 'middling' migrants, that is, the relatively educated and skilled but not elite, who arrive in Australia on temporary visas. The analysis highlights the interplays and dependencies of different 'logics of operation' (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) of infrastructure in relation to these migrants' status mobilities and housing mobilities within the receiving society. The paper draws on data from in-depth narrative interviews with migrants to also understand how infrastructure produces perceptions and meaning-making around the migration process. This analysis reveals that, in this empirical context, migration infrastructure produces varied kinds of spatio-temporal insecurity as much as it mediates mobility.

1. Introduction

In May 2015, Fairfax Media exposed evidence that students at several Sydney universities, many of them international students, had cheated at their studies by paying for assignments to be custom written by MyMaster, a Sydney-based online service run by a Chinese-born entrepreneur. Businesses like MyMaster have flourished in Australia in recent years, partly because, since the mid-2000s, obtaining an Australian degree has become inextricably linked to longer-term migration options. Three out of five international students seek permanent residency after their studies (Group of Eight Australia, 2014), and graduates holding temporary post-study work visas (sub-class 485) have increased by over 50% between 2015 and 2016 (Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), 2016). In the same month as the Fairfax exposé, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported on a couple facing court—the man a migration agent and the woman a marriage celebrant—who had brokered a number of sham marriages between Indian men on temporary visas, who paid up to $25,000 for the marriages to be arranged, and Australian women (Taylor, 2015).

I begin with these two media narratives because they are illustrative of some of the complex kinds of infrastructure emerging due to changing migration patterns and experiences in Australia, especially in relation to migrants from Asia. There are 1.9 million noncitizen residents currently living in Australia on temporary visas (DIBP, 2016), many of whom are seeking securer migration options in a constantly fluctuating policy environment. This has led to a need for geographies

of migration in Australia to engage with the significance of migration infrastructure that is situated *within* the receiving state. This type of infrastructure has become crucial to migrants' status transitions over time and their mobilities within the nation-state, but also to their everyday spatio-temporal experiences of migration. Despite this, receiving country infrastructure remains less visible in the literature than the infrastructure that facilitates recruitment and migrants' initial border-crossings in sending countries.

This paper seeks to consider new possibilities of the 'infrastructural turn' for migration geography by addressing two key questions. First, how do the 'logics of operation' of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) function in the context of processes of migrant mobility that occur largely within the receiving society, and in the context of 'middling' migration, that is, migrants who are relatively educated and skilled but not elite professionals? And second, how is infrastructure as a "multi-faceted space of mediation" (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014: S141) made sense of by migrants themselves in terms of their spatio-temporal experience of the migration process? In the following sections, I first position this paper within the literature on migration infrastructure, and outline some of the specifics of the contemporary Australian immigration context, before discussing the context of the research study and its methods. I then explore two case studies of the operation of migration infrastructure in relation to contemporary Asian migration to Australia. I focus first on the case of language testing and second on the case of housing markets. For each case, I provide a broad illustrative analysis of the infrastructural logics of operation and their interplays and interdependencies across varied

E-mail address: s.robertson@westernsydney.edu.au.

spaces of mediation. I then turn in each case to analysis of a single migrant narrative to highlight the interpretive work involved in narrations of infrastructural processes and the spatio-temporal experiences they produce. This analysis seeks to highlight the generative nature of infrastructures, in presenting how they not only mediate, but also produce, particular experiences, interpretations and modes of being in space and time. My central argument is that, in these specific cases, migration infrastructures produce varied kinds of spatio-temporal insecurity as much as they mediate mobility.

2. Migration infrastructure

Migration infrastructure is understood as the systematically interlinked networks of actors, technologies and institutions that condition and facilitate migrant mobility (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Migration infrastructure is compromised not only of the governance processes of sending and receiving states that control flows of migrants, but also the processes of private industries, non-government actors, transportation and communications systems, and migrant social networks. Importantly, an infrastructural perspective understands these different processes as interlinked and cross-cutting, rather than as discrete factors, in the conditioning of how and when migrants move and how they experience mobility. The infrastructural perspective allows migration to be understood as a process of mediation, adding to the calls from migration geography to understand migration as a multi-situated process, rather than a singular event (Kōu and Bailey, 2014). But, as Xiang and Lindquist (2014: S142) suggest, migration infrastructure is also "both an analytical perspective that reconceptualizes what is already known and a methodological tool that renders visible what was previously hidden." It is thus the aim of this article to render visible some of the hidden dimensions and generative capacities of migration infrastructure that operate within the context of receiving contexts and middling migrant experiences. In this section, I look briefly at the development of key literature that has shaped understandings of migration through an infrastructural lens, focusing in particular on the work of Xiang and Lindquist (2014). I then outline the empirical context of this paper—contemporary processes of 'staggered' and 'middling' migration from Asia to Australia—in relation to an infrastructural framing.

International migration has been understood for some time as a set of processes that are intensively mediated (Castles, 2003; Stalker, 2000). Early work on the mediation of migration, however, focused on the commercial agents who facilitate mobility at the 'sending' end, such as lawyers, labour recruiters, travel agents and other brokers (Cohen, 1997). Subsequent work developed the concept of a global migration industry, thus bringing into view the actors who profit from settlement and adaptation processes in receiving contexts as well as those who profit directly from cross-border mobility (Garapich, 2008: 736). Empirical studies that analyse intermediaries in the movement of migrants across borders (see for example, Hardill and MacDonald, 2000; Buchan et al., 2005; Elrick and Lewandowska, 2008) have grown substantially in recent years. This includes policy-focused work that has concentrated on recruitment and trafficking/smuggling. Such work places specific actors, most often recruiters, 'fixers', criminal networks and border agents at the centre of the analysis (see, for example, Martin, 2005; Fernandez, 2013; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorenson, 2013; Agunias, 2012).

A move towards an 'infrastructural turn' (Collins, 2013) in migration research, however, offers a more mobile and multi-situated lens to analyse the processes, complexities and consequences of how migration is mediated in different contexts. I position this paper particularly in relation to work that has focused on migration infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific context (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Lindquist et al., 2012; Collins, 2013, 2012a). I draw primarily on Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) framing of five "logics of operations" of infrastructure: the commercial, the regulatory, the technological, the social and the humanitarian, yet

adapt this approach to a new empirical context. Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) study focuses empirically on low-skilled labour migration from China and Indonesia. Here, the commercial logic is primarily to do with recruitment intermediaries. My understanding of this logic is broader, encompassing any commercial enterprise that draws a profit from the conditioning and facilitating of migrant mobilities, both between sending and receiving sites and within receiving sites. I also argue that, in the context of the 'middling' migration that is the empirical focus of this paper, a humanitarian logic is better replaced with a 'non-governmental' logic. This term encompasses non-profit services that assist migrants but don't always operate through an aid or humanitarian perspective. Like Xiang and Lindquist (2014) I am still fundamentally interested in the "contradictions and collusions" (S124) across logics of operation as they constitute infrastructural processes, and I position the different logics as deeply entangled and fundamentally relational.

Most work on migration infrastructure, as well as work more generally focused on migration industries, is concerned with sending countries and processes of recruitment and transit, usually of low-skilled workers. The temporal focus in Xiang and Lindquist's work (2014), as in many other studies of migration mediation (see for example Martin, 2005; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen, 2013; Kern and Müller-Böker, 2015) is largely on recruitment, pre-departure, transport and return, and the migration processes often examined are heavily controlled and regulated. I seek to add new empirical dimension to this literature by focusing on the textures and interplays of infrastructure's "logics of operation" in a receiving setting, and focusing on the more relatively privileged mobilities of 'middling' migrants.

There are also limited perspectives in the literature on the interpretive work that occurs in migrants' narrations about infrastructure in relation to their own spatio-temporal experiences. A few empirical studies in migration geography consider how mediation processes produce specific experiences and meanings for migrants (Cranston, 2016; Findlay et al., 2013; Collins, 2012b). However, most of the work that takes an explicitly infrastructural perspective centres brokers as actors or focuses on mediation processes in relation to broader geopolitical and social transformation. Instead, I consider the operations of mediation in terms of how they shape migrants' social and spatial experience of the everyday. In the two case studies of language testing and housing markets, I argue primarily that infrastructures produce or exacerbate varied modes of spatio-temporal insecurity.

3. Asia-Australia migration processes

Contemporary Asia-Australia migration processes are a useful vantage point from which to empirically explore migration infrastructure in relation to receiving contexts and middling migration. Australia has a large and historically state-managed migration system. This system is now under transformation as various commercial actors and concerns, including the education industry, private employers and migration agents, have become embedded in regulatory processes (Howe and Reilly, 2014; Baas, 2007; Khoo et al., 2005).

While registered migration agents constitute only a fraction of infrastructural actors, recent increases in the role of agents give some quantitative sense of the growing importance of mediation in Australian migration processes. The number of registered migration agents increased from 2429 in 2000–01 to 4436 in 2010–11 (Migration Institute of Australia, 2011), and during the final quarter of 2014, 73% of 457 Temporary Work visa applications,[1] 75% of Employer Sponsored visa applications, 67% Business Skills visa applications and

---

[1] The Temporary Work (Skilled) visa subclass 457 (known as the '457 visa') is the most commonly used program for Australian or overseas employers to sponsor skilled overseas workers to work in Australia temporarily. It allows skilled workers to be sponsored by approved employers to work in Australia for up to four years.