



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Hoang, LA;Zhang, J

Title:

Migrant immobilities beyond the pandemic: Changing migration patterns and aspirations

Date:

2023-06-01

Citation:

Hoang, L. A. & Zhang, J. (2023). Migrant immobilities beyond the pandemic: Changing migration patterns and aspirations. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 32 (2), pp.362-370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01171968231182032>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/332060>

License:

[CC BY-NC](#)

# Migrant immobilities beyond the pandemic: Changing migration patterns and aspirations


Asian and Pacific Migration Journal  
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–9  
© Scalabrini Migration Center 2023



Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/01171968231182032  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/amj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/amj)



**Lan Anh Hoang**   
The University of Melbourne

**Juan Zhang**   
University of Bristol

## Abstract

Transnational migration entails profound changes to gender subjectivities and family structures, social networks and urban landscapes, and lifestyles and aspirations. Pandemic-induced immobilities have led many to question the assumed links between migration and mobility, and heightened interest in mobility inequalities. This research note offers critical insights into the “immobility turn” scholarship and highlights the gaps in our understanding of immobilities as both a social phenomenon and a conceptual tool. By placing our analytical focus on migrant immobilities, this research note sheds light on important changes in the meanings and values associated with migration and (im)mobility across contexts.

## Keywords

migration, immobilities, aspiration, inequalities, globalization

---

### Corresponding author:

Lan Anh Hoang, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia.  
Email: [lahoang@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lahoang@unimelb.edu.au)

## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing health and economic crises around the world have prompted a renewed, and perhaps even heightened interest in immobilities (Adey et al., 2021; Martin and Bergmann, 2021). Immobility is not a new topic. Being “immobile” physically and socially has certainly been a common experience underpinning people’s lives and livelihoods predating the well-observed “mobility turn.” Migration scholars have long questioned the taken-for-granted normality of transnational mobilities when disease and disaster, conflict and ethnonationalism, race and gender, socio-economic inequalities, and structural exploitations have continuously shaped a social world of divided geopolitics and differentiated mobility trajectories (Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Sheller, 2018). In such instances, what may be entailed in this new “immobility turn,” and how do we understand it as the world moves on from the pandemic?

In this critical review, we address the “immobility turn” and engage with a shared concern on multiple, intersecting forms of disruptions and uncertainties associated with immobility. Being immobile is not something uniquely experienced by those located at the socio-economic bottom and the edges of cultural and political integration, or those on the outside of mainstream citizenship debates and human rights discussions as past studies have focused on; it became an all-too-common condition of living that almost everyone had to confront with during the pandemic times, which compounded the multifaceted conditions of control, deprivation and racialization. The experiences of being immobile already existed long before COVID-19, but new everyday realities were now organized around heightened migration control and biopolitical governance. By “common,” we mean a much more widespread understanding of (in)voluntary stasis and the shared feelings of uncertainty that impact lives with short- and long-term implications.

This critical review also cautions against the collective desire for society to “go back to normal” when, in the words of Bridget Anderson (2020), “normal was the problem.” The familiar “old normal” of global connectivity before pandemic times needs to be challenged, and the nostalgic desire of returning to a frictionless, freewheeling world with unhindered movements needs to be questioned. Clearly, the desire to return to “normal”—whatever that may mean—is often shared and expressed from a position of privilege, unburdened by the extractive modus operandi of capitalist expansion and the widening structural inequalities felt locally and transnationally. Such disparities were noted when tens of thousands of Filipina domestic workers lived through prolonged quarantine and isolation in Hong Kong during COVID-19 (Ullah et al., 2021), or when Indian migrant workers were forced to embark on an arduous journey of marching home on foot (Nayar, 2020). In contrast, holidaymakers in the Global North were ready to travel again via newly charted

“safe routes” and “travel bubbles” (Fuste-Forne and Michael, 2021). Patterns of mobility injustice continue to produce “uneven mobility futures” (Sheller, 2016: 15) when many intersections of bodies and borders co-produce conditions in which new regulatory norms emerge and existing socio-political inequalities undermine human resilience. With the “old normal” lingering on and the “uneven futures” looming ahead, a change in perspective from mobilities to immobilities will offer critical insights on how people around the world are slowly transitioning to a post-pandemic life. By placing our analytical focus on migrant immobilities, we challenge the assumed link between migration and mobility, and highlight important changes in the meanings and values associated with migration and (im)mobility across contexts. This perspective also takes a step forward in theorizing immobilities in the Asian context in the face of multifaceted geopolitical tensions, changing economic outlooks, and transforming social relations that are culturally and technologically mediated.

*From the “new mobilities paradigm” to the “immobility turn”:  
Migration and inequalities*

In the “new mobilities paradigm,” “all the world seems to be on the move” (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 207) and, as such, immobilities seem not only irregular but also undesirable. For some time, transnational migration’s “old normal” has been sustained by interconnecting infrastructural networks, global logistical operations, “the internet of things” as well as real-time communication enabled by accessible virtual platforms (Lin et al., 2017). Such interconnected possibilities create a convincing narrative of seamless physical and social mobilities, unhindered by any occasional slow-downs, detours, unexpected turnarounds and stoppages. Not being able to move, in that sense, becomes an exception rather than the norm. Immobilities are bracketed as temporary abnormalities that suspend and disrupt. They may eventually be overcome if migrants “wait things out” with patience and strategy (Bissell, 2007; Hage, 2009), and if nation-states and regulatory authorities work towards removing barriers and excessive control aimed at “making move and letting stop” (Salter, 2013: 7).

It is probably within a similar fixated imagination that modern societies and economies are built upon constant (albeit unequal) movements of people and ideas, of goods and resources, that we see global mobility as enabling and desirable, and immobility as its negation. It explains why the world went into a total panic when the coronavirus pandemic swept across vast territories and populations, when airplanes were grounded, borders shut down, streets emptied and logistical processes severely disrupted (Adey et al., 2021; Martin and Bergmann, 2021). Pandemic-induced immobilities have led many to question yet again the problematic restrictions on migrants’ freedom of movement (Mezzadra and Stierl, 2020), on the pathological treatments of transnational flows (Lin and Yeoh, 2021), and on “urged mobilities” that

compel certain businesses and services to remain open and certain workers to carry on moving so as to keep the system running in crisis mode (Dobusch and Kreissl, 2020: 713).

With a strong analytical push, these studies on pandemic (im)mobilities (Adey et al., 2021) have renewed the call for moving beyond the persistent mobility bias in migration studies (see, Schewel, 2019), and considered non-movement, slow movement and interruptions as an important research agenda with a new “immobility turn” (Bélanger and Silvey, 2019; Cairns et al., 2021). Focusing on the “constraints, regulations, and limits simultaneously placed on migration, everyday mobility, and border-crossings at multiple scales” (Bélanger and Silvey, 2019: 3), the “immobility turn” scholarship sheds light on the “involuntary immobility” of the populations who are often referred to as non-migrants and stayers, who are “left-behind” or “stuck.” Observing the mutually constitutive relationship between the wealth gap and the mobility gap (Carling, 2002; Chatterji, 2017; Lubkemann, 2008), scholarly attention has often been disproportionately focused on the structural and personal forces that drive migration. Little is known, however, about how the same structural and personal forces compel many people to stay put. Sedentary and nomadic accounts are thus equally important in helping unravel the myriad ways in which migration operates across cultural, societal and economic differences in the world. When immigration policies in destination states are reduced to a balancing act between neoliberal economic goals and security concerns, skilled middle-class professionals find their mobility opportunities considerably expanded while poor, low-skilled men and women in the Global South face a steep escalation in the costs and risks of migration to traditional destinations in the Global North. Meanwhile, recent shifts in the global economic order and the expansion of the digital infrastructure have enabled the emergence of new destinations and opportunities for migrants and their families, which is elaborated upon in the following section.

### *Unfree migrants and changing aspirations*

It is often assumed that migration from the Global South to the Global North is invariably deemed desirable at places of origin and, therefore, people do not migrate primarily because they are unable to do so due to various constraints, particularly poverty, insecurity and restrictive gender norms. Carling (2002: 5), for example, suggested that we ought to better characterize our times as an “age of involuntary immobility,” rather than an “age of migration” (Castles and Miller, 2009). In this “age of involuntary immobility,” women are more likely to be tied down to one place by the cumulative effects of gender inequalities, sexuality norms, physical frailty and obligations of care (Chatterji, 2017; Hoang, 2011). Overall, the aspiration to migrate (to a more developed country or place)

is seen as a given; it is the ability (or a lack thereof) that holds the key to understanding why some people migrate while others stay put.

While this remains broadly true for many contexts, it is by no means a universal reality in the Global South. Globalization, economic growth and the digital boom have reconfigured the global economic order, engendered new possibilities and aspirations, and altered the meanings of migration. One of the most crucial changes is that the North no longer remains the only destination of choice for migrants from the South. According to the 2020 World Migration Report (IOM, 2020), Asia experienced the most remarkable growth as a migration destination during the 2000–2019 period (69 percent or 34 million people), making it the second most important destination in the world (after Europe). While many people circulating in peripheral migration corridors do so because immigration and border regimes have become increasingly restrictive in the West, which is often their first choice (Collins, 2019; Haugen, 2012), others choose peripheral destinations over the capitalist core because of the loosely regulated markets, weak law enforcement and even endemic corruption that creates exceptional economic opportunities not possible elsewhere (Hoang, 2020). Some traditional emigrant countries like China and India have become popular immigrant destinations in recent years while the aspiration to migrate to the West for work is fading among certain segments of Indian and Chinese population due to the unprecedented opportunities created by sustained economic growth at home. India, for example, was listed among top 20 destinations by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (IOM, 2020) in 2019, attracting large numbers of irregular migrants from neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. These macro-level trends are supported by growing qualitative evidence which shows that immobility is not necessarily involuntary in many parts of the developing world (Hoang and Yeoh, 2012; Mata-Codesal, 2015). The mass relocation of industrial capital and production from developed to developing countries in the past decades has transformed the labor markets in the latter, radically altering the cost–benefit ratio in people’s migration decision-making. Many citizens in the Global South, Schewel (2019) observes, stay put not because they are unable to move but because migration is far from desirable in their situations.

The inordinate focus on the immobility of those who stay put in the migration scholarship, however, often overshadows the fact that “voluntary” migrants can be immobilized during transit or at the destination. As nationalist and anti-globalist sentiments intensify in many “host” societies, economic migrants come to be seen as a threat (Bélanger and Silvey, 2019). Typically considered inferior in terms of racial and class backgrounds, low-skilled migrants are allowed to enter and stay in the receiving country as long as they remain disposable, transient, unfree and immobile (Hoang, 2020).

While low-skilled, undocumented and forcibly displaced migrants are more likely to face mobility restrictions, immobility is not exclusively a working-class

phenomenon. Research on “middling” migrants (Conradson and Latham, 2005) highlights the diverse and sometimes ambivalent (im)mobility experiences of skilled middle-class professionals and international students who oscillate in the fluid terrain between the underclass and the transnational elite. Despite their cultural capital, “middling” migrants do not necessarily have greater control (than working-class migrants) over their movements. Migrant subjects, Smith (2005: 238) reminds us, are “classed, raced and gendered bodies in motion in specific historical contexts within certain political formations and spaces.” Every immobility account embodies a specific set of overlapping and intersecting axes of inequality at a specific time and place. Inequalities, therefore, manifest not only between non-migrants and migrants but also among people on the move.

Migrant immobilities, or “immobility in mobility” in Bélanger and Silvey’s (2019: 3,428) words, challenge the assumed link between migration and mobility. Immobilities studies are primarily concerned about the state (and its proxies) as an overpowering regulatory and disciplinary force that decides who moves and who stays put (Bigo, 2002; Johnson, 2015). We know little about immobilities as a subjective experience, as well as migrants’ agency in regulating their own movements. As illustrated by Hoang’s (2020) research on Vietnamese irregular migrants in Russia, immobility in some situations is neither absolute nor externally imposed. There is no material infrastructure that keeps these Vietnamese migrants in one place. Yet, they feel stuck, immobilized, even imprisoned by the legal violence and xenophobic hostility in post-Soviet Russia. The co-constitutive dynamics of mobilities and immobilities are, indeed, rooted in gender, race, nationality and class (Bélanger and Silvey, 2019). This demands a multiscalar and intersectional framework for unpacking both economic and non-economic, personal and structural determinants of (im)mobility.

## Conclusion

The “immobility turn” scholarship offers critical insights into the inner contradictions of globalization. While non-migrant immobilities are mainly attributed to poverty (Chatterji, 2017; Carling, 2002), migrant immobilities tend to arise from the ambivalent treatment of the foreign Other whose labor is required for the globalized economy but whose personal attributes are deemed incompatible with the perceived racial and/or cultural homogeneity and superiority of the host society (Hoang, 2023). In the Asian context, the “immobility turn” will bring scholarly focus towards not only those who are unable to move, or those who are “left behind,” but also individuals who are migrating within the region while experiencing new forms of social and physical immobility. Looking beyond the familiar Global South–North pathway, a closer examination of South–South dynamics as well as North–South flows can

advance scholarly debates on migration and (im)mobilities. The assumed cultural affinity or geopolitical closeness within the same region does not suggest smooth journeys or trouble-free border-crossing (e.g., Zhang et al., 2015). Migrants from the Global North coming into Asian societies for study, work, marriage and care, also experience differentiated treatment, and in recent years, more acute discrimination due largely to rising nationalist sentiments (e.g., in China during COVID-19 and the anti-Americanism in South Korea). What remains underexplored are the social technologies, cultural values, aspirations and imaginaries that arise from situations of immobilities and how people's future (im)mobilities are shaped by their experiences today. Space and place are instructive for understanding people's social practices and aspirations. As a conceptual lens, the "immobility turn" enables us to capture the inequalities that underlie mobility and migration while remaining attentive to shifts in migrants' identities and social practices which are constantly in flux.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iDs

Lan Anh Hoang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3763-5272>

Juan Zhang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3613-6332>

### References

- Adey P, Hannam K, Sheller M, et al. (2021) Pandemic (Im)mobilities. *Mobilities* 16(1): 1–19. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2021.1872871](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1872871).
- Anderson B (2020) No more "back to normal" — "normal" was the problem: Thoughts on corona, 01 April. Migration Mobilities Bristol. Available at: <https://migration.bristol.ac.uk/2020/04/01/no-more-back-to-normal-normal-was-the-problem-thoughts-on-corona/>
- Bélanger D and Silvey R (2019) An im/mobility turn: Power geometries of care and migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46(16): 3423–3440. DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2019.1592396](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1592396).
- Bigo D (2002) Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease. *Alternatives: Global Local Political* 27(1): 63–92. DOI: [10.1177/03043754020270S105](https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754020270S105).

- Bissell D (2007) Animating suspension: Waiting for mobilities. *Mobilities* 2(2): 277–298. DOI: [10.1080/17450100701381581](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100701381581).
- Cairns D, Franca T, Calvo DM, et al. (2021) An immobility turn? The Covid-19 pandemic, mobility capital and international students in Portugal. *Mobilities* 16(6): 874–887. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2021.1967094](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1967094).
- Carling J (2002) Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and cape verdean experiences. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28(1): 5–42. DOI: [10.1080/13691830120103912](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120103912).
- Castles S and Miller M (2009) *The Age of Migration, International Population Movements in the Modern World*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Chatterji J (2017) On being stuck in Bengal: Immobility in the “age of migration.” *Modern Asian Studies* 51(2): 511–541. DOI: [10.1017/S0026749X16000664](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000664).
- Collins F (2019) Anxious desires: Temporary status and future prospects in migrant lives. *Emotion, Space and Society* 31: 162–169. DOI: [10.1016/j.emospa.2017.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.10.004).
- Conradson D and Latham A (2005) Transnational urbanism: Attending to everyday practices and mobilities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(2): 227–233. DOI: [10.1080/1369183042000339891](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000339891).
- Dobusch L and Kreissl K (2020) Privilege and burden of im-/mobility governance: On the reinforcement of inequalities during a pandemic lockdown. *Gender, Work, and Organization* 27(5): 709–716. DOI: [10.1111/gwao.12462](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12462).
- Fuste-Forne F and Michael N (2021) Limited tourism: Travel bubbles for a sustainable future. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 31(1): 73–90. DOI: [10.1080/09669582.2021.1954654](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1954654).
- Hage G (2009) Waiting out the crisis: On stuckedness and government-ality. In: Hage G (ed.) *Waiting*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, pp. 97–106.
- Haugen HØ (2012) Nigerians in China: A second state of immobility. *International Migration* 50(2): 65–80. DOI: [10.1111/j.1468-2435.2011.00713.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2011.00713.x).
- Hoang LA (2011) Gender identity and agency in migration decision making: Evidence from Vietnam. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37(9): 1441–1457. DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2011.623618](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.623618).
- Hoang LA (2020) *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia: Mobility in Times of Uncertainty*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Hoang LA (2023) Migrant immobilities in the periphery: Insights from the Vietnam-Russia corridor. *Mobilities*. Epub ahead of print, 23 February 2023. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2023.2177183](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2023.2177183).
- Hoang LA and Yeoh BSA (2012) Sustaining families across transnational spaces: Vietnamese migrant parents and their left-behind children. *Asian Studies Review* 36(3): 307–325. DOI: [10.1080/10357823.2012.711810](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.711810).
- International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2020) World migration report 2020. Report, Report no. PUB2019/006/L WMR 2020, 27 November. Geneva: International Organization for Migration. Available at: [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr\\_2020.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf)

- Johnson M (2015) Surveillance, pastoral power and embodied infrastructures of care among migrant Filipino muslims in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Surveillance and Society* 13(2): 250–264. DOI: [10.24908/ss.v13i2.5339](https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v13i2.5339).
- Lin W, Lindquist J, Xiang B, et al. (2017) Migration infrastructures and the production of migrant mobilities. *Mobilities* 12(2): 167–174. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2017.1292770](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2017.1292770).
- Lin W and Yeoh BSA (2021) Pathological (im)mobilities: Managing risk in a time of pandemics. *Mobilities* 16(1): 96–112. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2020.1862454](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1862454).
- Lubkemann S (2008) Involuntary immobility: On a theoretical invisibility in forced migration studies. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(4): 454–475. DOI: [10.1093/jrs/fen043](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen043).
- Martin S and Bergmann J (2021) (Im)mobility in the age of COVID-19. *International Migration Review* 55: 660–687. DOI: [10.1177/0197918320984104](https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918320984104).
- Mata-Codesal D (2015) Ways of staying put in Ecuador: Social and embodied experiences of mobility–immobility interactions. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(14): 2274–2290. DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2015.1053850](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1053850).
- Mezzadra S and Stierl M (2020) What happens to freedom of movement during a pandemic? 24 March. openDemocracy. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/what-happens-freedom-movement-during-pandemic/>
- Nayar PK (2020) The long walk: Migrant workers and extreme mobility in the age of Corona. *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 4(1): E1–E6. DOI: [10.5617/7856](https://doi.org/10.5617/7856).
- Salter M (2013) To make move and let stop: Mobility and the assemblage of circulation. *Mobilities* 8(1): 7–19. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2012.747779](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.747779).
- Schewel K (2019) Understanding immobility: Moving beyond the mobility bias in migration studies. *International Migration Review* 54(2): 328–355. DOI: [10.1177/0197918319831952](https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319831952).
- Schiller NG and Salazar NB (2013) Regimes of mobility across the globe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(2): 183–200. DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253).
- Sheller M (2016) Uneven mobility futures: A foucauldian approach. *Mobilities* 11(1): 15–31. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2015.1097038](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2015.1097038).
- Sheller M (2018) *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*. London: Verso.
- Sheller M and Urry J (2006) The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38(2): 207–226. DOI: [10.1068/a37268](https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268).
- Smith MP (2005) Transnational urbanism revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(2): 235–244. DOI: [10.1080/1369183042000339909](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000339909).
- Ullah AA, Nawaz F and Chattoraj D (2021) Locked up under lockdown: The COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant population. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 3(1): 100126. DOI: [10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100126](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100126).
- Zhang C, Blashill AJ, Wester SR, et al. (2015) Factor structure of the gender role conflict scale-short form in Chinese heterosexual and gay samples. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 16(2): 229–233. DOI: [10.1068/d24111](https://doi.org/10.1068/d24111).