Creating Home Away from Home: Mobile Phones and Migrant Workers in Asia

a free public lecture by

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ABSTRACT

The inflow of migrant workers within the Asian region has been a significant phenomenon. With the growth of Asian economies, reliance on the supply of migrant workers has become more important to sustain competitiveness especially in labor-intensive sectors. Malaysia, for one, is a large importer of labor in the region. An estimated 16 per cent of the country’s total employed workforce is comprised of foreign workers with vital communication and information needs.

The paper examines how mobile phones have become significant devices for migrant workers to adapt to new environments. The paper looks into: (1) the information and communication needs and practices specifically of Indonesian, Filipino, and Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, and Myanmarese, Cambodian, and Laotian migrant workers in Thailand; (2) their aspirations and interests on entertainment, local content, and media consumption; and (3) their social networks in their host environments.

Through in-depth interviews and photo novellas (picture stories), the paper investigates how migrant use of mobile phones paves the way for forming and maintaining social circles that are integral in their lives away from home. The lifestyles and mobile phone culture of selected migrant workers in Malaysia and in Thailand reflect how links with their own home countries are sustained with mobile technology as a tool. The paper hopes to shed light on the role played by mobile usage in building social capital and inclusion among Asian migrant workers.