

# UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY LABOR MIGRATION PATTERNS AND PROCESSES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## Enduring patterns and processes in South East Asia

From a temporal viewpoint, current labor migration movements in Southeast Asia typically replicate past foreign labor migrations, while labor processes continue to mirror the significance of political-economic relationships in the region. Historically, international labor migration in Southeast Asia is best understood from the perspective of the region's natural resources, demographic situation, and incorporation into the global economy. European imperialism after the 1870s, and the growth of the Atlantic economy were consistent with capitalist expansion and colonization of Southeast Asian states. Subsequently, these states became suppliers of mineral and other natural resources, and were also transformed by substantial waves of labor immigration, primarily from China and India. It is commonly assumed that the Asian migrants comprised only men, who journeyed either as forced or indentured workers to toil in Southeast Asia. This supposition ignores the migration of free men and women into the region. Furthermore, a majority of historians have also taken for granted that Asian migrations, like the Atlantic migrations, ended in 1914, following the onset of World War One. In fact Asian "colonial" migrations continued into the 1940s and also afterwards.

The gap in historical understanding about the different types of labor movement further ignores the enduring patterns and processes connecting past and present migration movements. These observations have also influenced debates on contemporary economic migration in the region. In the 1970s and 1980s, sovereign Southeast Asian states embraced labor-intensive industrialization, and were pulled into the "new" international division of labor. Crucially, most states continue to depend on migrant workers, and their development pathways demonstrate the enduring socio-economic importance of migrant workers to their econo-

mies, as before. Currently, the more successful Southeast Asian states – Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand – actively pursue foreign investment by remaining competitive and promoting their low-waged labor pools and market-friendly policy environments. In order to augment their diminishing less-skilled labor pools, whether for production of labor-intensive goods, or for construction purposes, or to increase women's labor-force participation in the formal economy, these states depend greatly on foreign less-skilled Asian migrant men and women workers. Significantly, a vital change has been in the "Work of Care". The re-ordering of the gendered division of labor and the need to balance demands for care work with equal opportunity for women residents has also led to recruitment of women mainly from South Asia and poorer Southeast Asian states to shoulder the responsibility for the care of the elderly and children. Crucially, a major transnational change reflects the rising demand for professionals and skilled (or knowledge) workers in specific occupational categories. These changes, together with the creation of sub-regional labor markets, epitomize the new manifestations and diversity of migration movements in the region.

## Labor Migration and Labor Processes, 1870s -1940s

Southeast Asia's greater integration into the new globalized system of production, trade, and investment flows in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the carving up and redrawing of the region's political map. Six major states were fashioned, namely British Burma, British Malaya, French Indochina, Dutch Indonesia, Spanish (later American) Philippines, and independent Thailand. All the states were mobilized for export production of foodstuffs, industrial crops, stimulants, and minerals to boost the fiscal resources of the home countries. The new economic corridors, which extended from southern China and South India to Southeast Asia, facilitated labor market integration and mass proletarian migrations to Southeast Asia.

The Chinese government did not support Chinese emigration, and consequently Chinese migration comprised two main networks: kinship-based migration, and the credit-ticket or steerage system. Labor brokers were also involved in the second migration network system.

Chinese migrants were predominantly from Fujian and Guangdong Provinces, and their journeys took place via Chinese colonies that had been annexed by the Europeans. These included Hong Kong and Macau and the other Chinese treaty ports that were opened to British and other Western traders, following China's defeat in Chinese-British trade conflicts known as the First and Second Opium Wars. According to McKeown ("Global Migration, 1846-1940", [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_world\\_history/v015/15.2mckeown.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_world_history/v015/15.2mckeown.pdf)), only a small percentage of Chinese migrants bound for Southeast Asia migrated under indenture contracts. Generally, the European colonizers and the Thai state placed no limits on Chinese migration, though there were a few residential restrictions, for example, in Java.

Organized (and regulated) labor migration generally took place between colonial territories under similar imperial administrations. Accordingly, the India Office and the Malayan administration jointly planned and administered recruitment programs for Indian labor bound for Malaya. This was done under the aegis of the Colonial Office in London. Both governments concentrated on recruitment practices, financing of travel, and transportation of workers to Malaya, where the workers were linked to plantations or public works departments. The British permitted some Indian labor migration to Sumatra (then under Dutch administration) while the Dutch allowed Javanese migration to Malaya. Burma represents a different category because it was governed by the British Indian government and considered part of British India. Thus Indian migration to Burma was within different provinces in British India and hence regarded as an internal movement. The Dutch and the French in the Netherlands Indies and Indochina respectively authorized movements of workers from overpopulated to underpopulated areas in their colonies. According to Huff and Caggiano ("Globalization and Labor Market Integration in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Asia", [http://www.gallbladder-research.org/media/media\\_32242\\_en.pdf](http://www.gallbladder-research.org/media/media_32242_en.pdf)), Burma, Malaya, and Thailand received more than 15 million Chinese and Indian migrants within the period 1881 to 1939.

In the case of Indian migration, private labor brokers/intermediaries were entrusted with the job of facilitating and driving labor migration via two recruitment methods – the indenture system and its variant, the *kangani* system. The indenture recruitment method authorized employers to utilize enforceable, written labor contracts, and migrants were indentured for a fixed period, varying from three to five years (reduced to three years after 1904). Subsequently, rubber planters employed their trusted workers to recruit Indian labor; hence introducing a chain migration outcome based on specific recruitment areas in South India. This system, known as the *kangani* recruitment system, was essentially a personal or informal recruitment system, and it became the preferred recruitment method after 1910. The *kangani* also provided the vital connection between impoverished areas in rural south India and the plantation frontier in Malaya by facilitating Indian migration.

Some women's migration, originally associational, improved when men and women were positioned differently in colonial labor markets. Consequently, task- and gender differentiation roles made women workers a cheaper alternative. For example, in the rubber industry, workers engaged in weeding tasks were paid lower wages than tappers, and hence it was possible to turn this task into a women's task and pay lower wages for "less strenuous" work. Furthermore, the India Office had stipulated that a certain percentage of Indian women be included in the labor hires due to the isolation of plantations. Consequently, the colonial administration was able to overcome the problem of isolation for the men and also lower production costs. Afterwards some overseers/*kangani* functioned as intermediaries/marriage brokers on plantations. Nevertheless, the proportion of Indian women for every 1,000 men in the census years was as follows: 171 (1901); 308 (1911); 406 (1921); 482 (1931) and 637 (1947) (see Kaur, "[Crossing Frontiers: Race, Migration and Borders in Southeast Asia](#)").

Wage differentiation was also prevalent in the tin mining sector. Panning for tin (a recovery method) in the tin tailings mounds was viewed as a more suitable job for women, and facilitated their gainful employment particularly during slumps. (Women were not allowed to enter mines). Thus women's employment and wage-

labor rights were deemed subordinate to those of men. Moreover, this policy enabled the British to achieve their goal of stabilizing the migrant labor force in the two main industries without increasing male migrants' wages. Consequently, the additional family earnings played a central role in achieving the goal of settled communities (see Kaur, "[Indian migrant workers in Malaysia](#)"). This disparity in the pay scales of men and women migrant workers similarly contributed to the continuing gendered migration patterns during the colonial period. Nevertheless, the percentage of women involved was rather small, and did not exceed more than 25 percent of the migrant population. In Malaya for example, the Chinese sex ratio varied from a 70:30 ratio at the beginning of the 1880s to a 75:25 ratio by the end of the 1920s.

### **Transnational Work and the post-colonial geographies of migration in Southeast Asia**

In the 1970s and 1980s international labor migration again became imperative for labor-force growth in Southeast Asia, analogous to the situation in Western industrial democracies. In the more developed Southeast Asian states – Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand – changing economic environments alongside declining fertility levels have underscored continuing dependence on skilled and less-skilled foreign workers (see Kaur, "[On the Move: International Migration in Southeast Asia since the 1980s](#)"). Against the backdrop of closer regional economic integration in the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) through the ASEAN Economic Community, member states have also developed increasingly selective admission policies for professionals and highly skilled foreign workers and migrants' educational qualifications, skills and networks have become important factors in their movement within ASEAN.

Concurrently, for less-skilled migrants, their journey to Southeast Asia has become an ephemeral experience for them since they are needed, not wanted. Migration is also accepted in return for the money earned for migrants' impoverished families. All three states have instigated managed migration policies to give migrant workers legal status and protection from exploitative labor practices; there are im-

portant policy differences between the three countries.

In Singapore the government, which had initially established its sovereignty in 1960 by prohibiting dual nationality, modified its immigration legislation in 1966 (after independence in 1965). The government also concentrated on building the state's economic foundations and signed bilateral labor agreements for recruitment of temporary guest workers with neighboring South/Southeast Asian states. Concurrently, the state made it easier for professionals and skilled foreign migrants to get permanent residency (and later citizenship) under its "foreign talent" policy. These professionals are allowed to take their families along with them, and are not subject to levies.

Malaysia too utilized the temporary guest-worker migration scheme for employment of less-skilled workers, and signed bilateral agreements (Memoranda of Understanding) between Malaysia and destination countries. In both countries the guest worker programs are essentially two-tiered: they provide incentives for skilled workers, boost circular migration flows among low-skilled workers, and focus on border control regimes. Less-skilled workers are employed in occupations shunned by locals, including the construction, agricultural and fisheries, manufacturing, and service sectors. They are generally paid lower wages than national workers and are denied many of the rights of citizens. They also have to return home on the completion of their contracts; their employment pass is employer- and employment- specific, and they are not allowed to have their families accompany them. The guest worker program, which is dependent on networks, intermediaries and brokerage firms, reinforces wage disparities between host and home countries.

In Thailand, the state's development strategies similarly encouraged the entry of foreign labor migrants. Since foreign investors mainly bankrolled the manufacturing sector, the state allowed these investors to recruit both highly skilled and less-skilled workers. In the case of low-skilled workers, unlike Singapore and Malaysia, the Thai government does not have a comprehensive migration policy that allows for recurrent admissions and has granted work permits to selected countries only (Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos). A large number of these

workers become unregistered because they are restricted to particular provinces. The government also regularly employs a nationality verification (NV) scheme in order to sort out the illegal migration problem. Crucially, all three countries' migration policies and processes for less-skilled migrants have led to migrants' susceptibility to forced labor situations. Thus these states' restrictive migration policies that concentrate on managing and controlling migration, effectively disregard migrants' rights and agency. Consequently, less-skilled workers are often "captured" and held in to detention camps prior to deportation. In Singapore they are "apprehended" and forcibly repatriated by repatriation companies.

Finally, international labor migration in Southeast Asia in recent decades has taken on a new dimension that focuses on the link between

residency and labor needs alongside the relationship between rich and poor nations. The word "immigrant", which normally implies permanent or long-term residence, is no longer considered appropriate for all categories of migrants. It is now routine to use the word "migration" to describe the temporary movement or mobility of less-skilled workers, referred to as "migrants" while skilled migrants are classified as permanent residents or citizens.

*Amarjit Kaur is author of "[Wage Labor in Southeast Asia since 1840: Globalisation, the International Division of Labor and Labor Transformations](#)", and co-edited "[Mobility, Labor Migration and Border Controls in Asia](#)" (with Ian Metcalfe), and "[Proletarian and Gendered Mass Migrations](#)" (with Dirk Hoerder).*