

INDENTURED MIGRATION WAS DRIVEN BOTH BY COLONIAL CAPITALISM AND BY REGIONAL SPECIFICITIES

Interview with Vincent Houben ([Professor of Southeast Asian History and Society](#), Humboldt University Berlin, Germany). The interview was conducted by Tobias Schwarz.

Tobias Schwarz: Prof. Houben, you are a historian working on modern and contemporary Southeast Asian history. Can you briefly outline what you think is particular regarding the historical migration pattern of South East Asia?

Vincent Houben: Southeast Asia has always been a region at the crossroads; therefore migration patterns involving China, India, and the Middle East have been an integral element of those economies and societies since long before Western colonization started. Several types of migration co-existed: labor migration within and between areas; religious pilgrimage; and resettlement as a consequence of political upheavals and conquest. Since colonialism and the rise of postcolonial statehood there have been attempts to survey and regulate existing migration patterns to a greater degree. Nowadays, temporary labor arrangements govern intra-regional migration (from Indonesia to Malaysia, from Myanmar to Thailand etc.) as well as transregional or international migration (mostly towards the Gulf and Northeast Asia).

TS: With regard to global migration history, the comparison is sometimes made between “free” migration in the Global North (i.e., massive waves of Europeans emigrating to the Americas during the 19th and early 20th century; or immigration into the USA and Europe today), and “non-free” migration within the Global South (i.e. colonial indentured laborers). Can such contrast between “free Northern” and “unfree Southern” migration (still) be regarded as an appropriate description?

VH: Amarjit Kaur’s book, [“Wage Labor in Southeast Asia since 1840”](#), which connects Southeast Asian historical and contemporary migration, sums up the major research findings for this world region quite convincingly. Kaur indicates that during colonialism there existed a generic linkage between industrialization in Europe and the rapid growth of labor migration from China, India, and Java to plantations and

mines in Southeast Asia. The predominant format was indentured labor, but many left their homes voluntarily. So, instead of contrasting free migration in the global North and unfree migration in the global South, one can observe that there existed and still exists a connection between North and South but that this connection cannot be simplified into a one-dimensional contrast between these two parts of the world.

TS: What are the theoretical implications that follow from contesting the “free vs. unfree migration” distinction?

VH: Between free and unfree labor migration there exists a whole spectrum of realities, which need to be specified according to context, both in a spatial and a temporal sense. What has been classified as “free” migration was often linked to the pressure of circumstance at home, so one can ask to what extent the choice to migrate has really been free. Implicated in contrasting a “free” North to an “unfree” South is a world-system model based on the work of the dependency theorists ([Gunder Frank](#), [Immanuel Wallerstein](#), [Fernando Cardoso](#) and others). However, the rise of the global South, particularly the BRIC states, has replaced dependency with a world system based on multipolarity. The theoretical implication is that the dividing line between global North and global South has increasingly become obsolete, as nowadays we can find both free and unfree forms of migration all over the world.

TS: Are the historical patterns of indentured migration in South(-east) Asia similar to those in other regions of the Global South, for instance because they were part of a common, integrated system of colonial rule? And would this imply that it makes sense to speak of a shared migration experience in the Global South?

VH: The choice between commonality and specificity of indentured migration in Southeast Asia depends on the perspective taken by the researcher. Indentured migration was historically linked to a system of colonial rule, which displayed certain common features all across the global South. At the core was the establishment of tight control over available human capital in order to generate profit for the colonial state and European business. However, within this

uniformity on a general level, there existed considerable variations in regional and even local patterns. Colonizers were most successful when they were able to build their systems of labor mobilization on already existing local arrangements. In some areas the supply of labor as a consequence of non-regulated migration was such that free wage-labor arrangements could be installed. In other areas a lack of local labor supply necessitated the implementation of unfree labor arrangements and forced migration. The way in which indentured migration constituted itself was therefore driven both by the uniformities of colonial capitalism and by regional specificities.

TS: In your work, you stress the relevance of historiographic research in order to understand contemporary societies. Can you give an example of how the historical roots (of e.g. coerced labor) inform today's structure of unfree labor migration?

VH: If we look at the migration patterns and labor relations of domestic and construction workers from Southeast Asia in other parts of Asia and the Middle East, the similarities with

the colonial era are striking – with regard to state regulations and surveillance, recruitment practices, and the nature of labor relations in the workplace. Assuming that there are systemic features of global capitalism which cause unfree labor migration to persist, and that there is an institutional memory involved in the mobility of labor, the study of history becomes all the more relevant for grasping the genealogy of contemporary labor migration in both the global North and the global South.

Vincent Houben's latest edited books include "[Figurations of Modernity. Global and Local Representations in Comparative Perspective](#)" and "[Southeast Asian Studies. Debates and New Directions](#)".