Introduction

> Why should any man take upon himself all the risks of sailing abroad to seek a livelihood?
>
> *Farmer in Shantou, China, c. 1934*

Over the past 150 years, the scale of human migration within Asia has been vast, greater than at any other time and place in human history. This book argues that migrants have been central to enduring and significant changes in modern Asian history: to economic and environmental transformations; to the spread of new political ideas and religious practices; to social and demographic change. Until recently, most histories of Asia have emphasized the perspectives of states, empires, and sedentary peoples. This book seeks to place migrants at the heart of modern Asian history.

Migration has been a widespread experience in many regions of Asia, but one that has, over time, come to be seen by states (and many historians) as anomalous or exceptional. 'We imagine that mobility is border crossing, as though borders came first, and mobility, second', David Ludden wrote in 2003. Historians have been too quick to project into the past the modern world of nation-states with strict controls over movement into and out of their territories. This book seeks to consider Asian history in more mobile terms, by emphasizing the importance of movement and by seeking to illustrate the connections that migrants made between distant places. Borders did not pre-date mobility. Many of the routes that Asian migrants followed in the age of mass migration built on much older traditions of circulation: along the Silk Road, across the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. Over the twentieth century, however, borders constrained and restricted mobility. They provoked many attempts at evasion.

This is a history of Asian migration since 1850; it is also a history of states' continuing attempts to control migration, and of individuals' and communities' efforts to resist, subvert, or adapt to such controls.[1]

[1] David Ludden, 'Presidential Address: Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 62, 4 (2003), 1057–1078: 1062.

Who Is a Migrant?

Are any and all people who move, migrants? Does it help to treat as a singular phenomenon such different kinds of mobility as seasonal movement for agricultural work, forced displacement in times of conflict, the voluntary movement of individuals and families in search of opportunity, and even religious pilgrimage? In this book, 'migration' is used as shorthand for many kinds of mobility that are connected in many ways.

One thing these different kinds of mobility have in common is that they created connections beyond the local. Mobility in its many forms widened people's social networks and their imaginative worlds. Migration, whether short-term or long-term, over shorter or longer distances, changed hundreds of millions of people's sense of the world they lived in. Looking broadly at migration undermines the boundaries that have shaped historical research, and placed Indian, Chinese, and Indonesian history – or histories of South, Southeast, and East Asia – into separate boxes. The inter-regional connections that people forged through migration were both cause and consequence of the expansion of states and markets, the spread of the printing press, and the growth of modern militaries.

This book will show throughout that different forms of human mobility are connected. The migration of men for military service spurred the conflicts that displaced many others as refugees. Short-term seasonal migration could pave the way for family members to undertake longer journeys. An initial journey under conditions of indenture could establish social networks that later led to a further wave of free migration by relatives. The movement of students and pilgrims in search of enlightenment or blessings could turn, unplanned, into long-term settlement.

Finally, the book will show that the experience of migration could reach across generations. Many people descended from migrants continued to maintain cultural, familial, and political links with the lands of their ancestors; to the extent that they did, their lives continued to be shaped by histories of migration. The question of how long a migrant would remain a migrant was not always a matter of choice. Experiences varied. In some cases, migrant origins were erased or forgotten over time, as the descendents of migrants assimilated into local populations. But at other times and in other places, even those who chose to cut their links with the lands of their forebears were reminded constantly of their alien origins – origins that were marked on their identity cards, in the neighbourhoods they lived in, in persistent popular prejudices and stereotypes. In the twentieth-century world of nation-states, migrant origins in the distant past could remain a reason for exclusion or discrimination – even, in extreme cases, expulsion.

While developing these commonalities and connections between different kinds and experiences of migration, the book will distinguish between broad patterns of mobility in modern Asian history:

1. The migration of soldiers, sailors, and administrators in the service of states and empires. Through the twentieth century, this category would expand to include the movement of professionals and technicians.
2. The migration of large numbers of people as a result of war and political violence: captives, refugees, displaced people. Throughout the period covered by this book, millions of Asians were uprooted by violence: periods of particularly acute or widespread conflict saw major surges in this kind of forced mobility.
3. The movements over long distances, but sometimes for short periods, of students, pilgrims, and intellectuals: writers, journalists, publishers, teachers. Though their numbers were small, such people were at the forefront of cultural and social change.
4. Labour migration over long distances – this includes the vast migrations to tropical plantations in the nineteenth century, and the movement of unskilled and skilled labour in the construction and service industries in more recent times.
5. Long-distance, often overland, movement for settlement in sparsely populated lands, both state-sanctioned and spontaneous. This is a process that we might call 'colonization', and one that more or less came to an end in the mid-twentieth century, as new land was used up.
6. Seasonal migration for agricultural work, most often over short distances, and involving more women than men. This sort of migration was a constant over the entire period considered by the book, and involved the greatest number of people. It is the least likely to be counted in censuses and official statistics.
7. Urbanization: over the period covered by this book, migration from rural to urban areas grew in scale and significance, and now constitutes the most common form of migration in Asia – in China, above all.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the common distinction between internal and international migration meant little in the Asian context. Most migration took place within and across the boundaries of empires. In the twentieth century, internal migration within empires turned abruptly into international migration, as new nations were formed and new borders drawn.

This book does not attempt to be comprehensive. Long-distance movement features more prominently than localized migration. The

case studies often focus on overseas or cross-continental migration, though long-distance internal migration to urban areas plays a significant role in the second half of the book (Chapters 4 and 5). The justification for this focus, apart from constraints of space, is that focusing on long-distance migration presents us with a good way of studying more general social, cultural, and economic effects of migration – not least because long-distance migration was facilitated by and connected with local and regional movements.[2]

Underlying all of these movements was a fundamental feature of Asian migration until the mid-twentieth century: the tendency toward circular migration, or 'sojourning'. Agricultural colonists, scholars, and contract labourers alike maintained close ties with their home regions as they moved away. Wherever possible, they travelled back and forth between their home regions and the places to which they moved for work, alternating periods at home with periods away. Historians of Chinese migration have argued that sojourning represents a distinctively Chinese approach to migration: a practice of temporary residence away from home, with the intention of return – a kind of experimental migration. But this book suggests that this pattern of circulation was equally characteristic of other streams of Asian migration, including migration from the Indian subcontinent. Here, too, an important story of historical change unfolds: sojourning became easier as transportation became easier and cheaper, and then progressively more complicated, as modern states in the twentieth century made increasingly insistent demands of exclusive loyalty.

The pattern of sojourning is by no means exclusive to the Asian experience: both intra-European and trans-Atlantic migrations were often circular in nature; so, too, were many patterns of regional migration within Africa. Nevertheless, a far greater proportion of European migrants settled permanently at their destinations compared with Chinese or Indian migrants within Asia: the transience of migration was particularly, but not exclusively, characteristic of the Asian experience.

Explaining Asia's Mobility Revolution

The traditional picture of Asian societies as static and immobile before European colonization needs revision. The changes that historians have associated with 'early modernity', including increased human mobility, were as fully experienced in Asia as elsewhere. Mobile merchants, itinerant pilgrims, soldiers, and sailors all traversed long distances in Asia,

[2] Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

long before the nineteenth century (Chapter 1). There was a change in scale in mobility around the middle of the nineteenth century. That moment of acceleration and expansion provides the chronological starting point for this book. In terms of the numbers of people involved, the distances they travelled, and the environmental and economic transformations they brought about, the second half of the nineteenth century represented the start of Asia's mobility revolution.

What were the main drivers of Asia's mobility revolution? Four key factors will recur throughout the book, in different combinations over time. First, the nineteenth century witnessed a transformation in the scale and destructiveness of warfare and political violence, with lasting consequences. Military technology became more lethal. The protracted process of European conquest in Asia provoked regional conflicts and mobilized millions: soldiers, camp followers, refugees, political exiles, forced labourers. Periods of spectacular violence forced mass migrations: the catastrophic civil war of China's Taiping Rebellion; the wars of conquest and resistance in Indonesia; the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia after 1941. More recently, civil strife or imperial wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma (now Myanmar), Iraq, northeast India, and Afghanistan, have displaced hundreds of thousands.

The second causal factor is perhaps even more significant in the long term: the history of uneven economic development in Asia. The expansion of capitalism in colonial Asia was patchy, and it had variable effects. Pockets of modern industry and plantation-style agriculture coexisted with large, impoverished regions of increasingly precarious subsistence cultivation. New demands – for instance, the need to pay taxes – led millions of young men, and a growing number of women, to seek employment in the cash economy. These patterns of development and impoverishment have changed significantly over time, but unevenness persists as a spur to migration. To the present day, the high-growth economies of Southeast Asia continue to attract labour from poor regions of Bangladesh, India, Burma, and Nepal. The migration from poorer inland provinces to burgeoning industrial cities in contemporary China is the most rapid in human history. This book seeks to avoid the language, common to migration scholarship, of 'push' and 'pull' factors, which suggests that migrants merely respond to economic forces beyond their control. Nevertheless, it is a demonstrable and enduring feature of the history of Asian migration that economic inequality explains both the motivations for migration and the specific patterns of mobility.

The third driving force for migration is the expansion in the reach, the capacities, and the ambitions of colonial and post-colonial states.

It took the armed force of expanding European empires to make the global export of Indian indentured labour in the nineteenth century both viable and profitable. Conversely, in seeking to escape the attentions and exactions of expanding states and their militaries, millions more uprooted themselves. In the twentieth century, the creation of new nation-states across Asia proved a further impetus to migration. Finding themselves on the wrong side of the new borders that divided Asia after 1945, millions of people moved as refugees. As post-colonial states consolidated their authority and realised their ambitions for economic and social transformation, they induced or forced millions more to make long journeys in the service of national development, while preventing other kinds of mobility.

A fourth driving force for Asia's mobility revolution – more speculative and less easy to demonstrate concretely – is a rise in environmental insecurity. In the second half of the nineteenth century, large parts of Asia suffered from cyclical climatic phenomena of unprecedented intensity: the 1870s and the 1890s experienced some of the most intensive El-Niño Southern Oscillations in a millennium. The pace of social and economic transformation increased communities' vulnerability to climatic shock, while also opening up migration as an avenue of escape. Tens of thousands of young Chinese and Indians sought security and survival overseas. Social networks, flows of information, and relations of credit turned migration into a viable means of escape from subsistence crises.

The rise of mass migration in the second half of the nineteenth century formed part of a process that made possible the twentieth-century 'tipping point' in anthropogenic climate change: a process of land clearance, intensified energy use, population concentration, and an increase in human productive (and destructive) capacity. This might well have caused a more lasting level of environmental instability, though it is difficult to make categorical statements. Later in the twentieth century, the development projects of post-colonial Asia often took the form of an assault on nature. These campaigns displaced millions directly – as refugees from dam-building projects – and indirectly – when those projects wreaked havoc with local environments. Scientists forecast that increasingly unpredictable monsoons, more frequent flooding, and an increased incidence of drought will produce a growing stream of 'climate refugees' from coastal areas of Asia.[3]

[3] Edmund Burke III and Kenneth Pomeranz (eds.), *The Environment and World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Transport, Communications, and Ideas

Asia's mobility revolution after 1850 required a number of facilitating conditions. Foremost among them was the global revolution in transportation and communications. Mass migration overseas was made possible by the steamship, and later by air travel. Railways and later roads facilitated overland migration. As we shall see, once the opening of new transport links allowed an initial wave of migration, this often created a self-sustaining circuit of further migration.

Communications were almost as important. The telegraph, the international postal service, and the printing press allowed for the spread of knowledge and information about distant places, and allowed families to keep in touch over ever-longer distances. Transport and communications contracted people's sense of both time and space. This process by which the world has come to seem both smaller and more connected is, of course, what we mean by the term 'globalization', but globalization in Asia has a long history.[4]

Finally, a precondition for migration – which was itself a result of migration – was a subtle, sometimes imperceptible, shift in attitudes and social norms. 'Migration', the American demographer Kingsley Davis wrote, 'is the result of an idea – an idea of what lies somewhere else'.[5] Historically, there were political and cultural barriers to migration and mobility in many Asian societies. These eroded over time. Migration became a normal, even expected, experience for millions of Asian families. At some point in the second half of the twentieth century, many Asian societies (but by no means all of them) underwent a further change in attitudes, allowing many young women to undertake long-distance migration without a consequent loss in their families' public reputations. This shift was so sweeping that by the late twentieth century, 60 per cent of the world's international migrants were women, and a majority among them were Asians.

Periodization

A rough periodization of the history of migration in modern Asia encompasses four main phases, which correspond with the sequence of chapters in this book. The first phase (Chapters 1 and 2) is the period from 1850 to about 1930: these decades witnessed the beginnings, the

[4] A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2001).
[5] Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 107.

rise, and the peak of mass migration in Asia, and involved millions of people in both short- and long-distance migration. The migrations of this period led to the formation of wholly new societies across Asia, in turn leading to a significant redistribution of population and the growth of settlement in areas that had, until the late nineteenth century, been sparsely populated.

The second period (Chapter 3) encompasses the middle decades of the twentieth century, from the economic depression of the 1930s to the aftermath of the Second World War and the crucial years of Asia's decolonization. These decades witnessed the disintegration of the system of inter-regional migration that had developed from 1850. Economic crises broke apart the connected markets that channelled young men from coastal India and China to Southeast Asia's frontiers. Migration became a political problem, as indigenous nationalist movements mobilized against migrants and outsiders. The Second World War broke the links of labour migration altogether, while stimulating the mass movement of refugees. The creation of new states after 1945 produced a further wave of forced migration.

The period from the 1950s to the 1970s (Chapter 4) marked the 'golden age' of the nation-state in Asia. This era saw a reduced level of international migration, as restrictions on entry and exit became widespread. For the first time, passports and visas began to govern the mobility of Asians across borders. Yet these years also saw very significant migration within national boundaries, stimulated (and often forced) by post-colonial development projects. The 1950s also saw an acceleration of Asia's urban growth. From this point on, movement from rural to urban areas has become the most common form of mobility in Asia.

The fourth phase in the modern history of Asian migration is the period since the early 1970s (Chapter 5): the era of contemporary globalization. This period has seen a further expansion in both internal and international migration, with the latter once again reaching the peak levels of the 1920s. Fundamental economic transformations underlie this renewed migration: the rise of flexible modes of mass production; the growth of the global service industry; the declining importance of agriculture to many Asian economies (with the significant exception of India); and the shift of the global economic center of gravity towards East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the oil economies of the Persian Gulf. These changes have been – and continue to be – accompanied by a further acceleration and cheapening of long-distance transport (notably air travel) and electronic and telephonic communications.

The Debates

The history of Asian migration has stimulated lively debate, even as migration has been under-emphasized in larger narratives of modern Asian history. Three problems have been at the root of historians' debates. The first concerns the causes of migration: historians have debated the relative weight of individual agency, family pressures, economic imperatives, and external coercion in shaping migration. Related to this is a deeper question: how free has Asian migration been in the modern world? Second, debate has focused on the cultural consequences of mass migration, and the formation of multiple Asian diasporas. Third, historians have focused on the changing regulation and government of migration over time. Each chapter of this book will consider these problems in more detail, but it is worth setting out their contours at the outset.

Freedom and Agency

For decades, scholars believed there was a categorical difference between European migration across the Atlantic in the nineteenth century and migration across the Indian Ocean and the China seas. The contrast turned on the question of freedom. One recent survey, for example, compares the 'voluntary and self-bound migrations in the Atlantic system' with Asian migration that 'involved a minority of free migrants, large numbers of self-bound migrants, and forced moves'.[6] Asian migration, on this view, was by and large a product of European imperial intervention and coercion. By contrast, scholars have argued recently that Asian and Atlantic systems of migration are broadly comparable, and that Asian and European migrants alike were responding to the underlying forces of globalization. Adam McKeown points out that indenture played a relatively insignificant role in Chinese migration overseas, and that the vast majority of Chinese migration remained under Chinese control. Alongside other historians of Chinese migration, McKeown emphasizes instead the power of family networks in channelling people from particular villages in China to distant but specific destinations overseas.[7]

By contrast, in the view of Jan Breman, the violence of European empires must remain a crucial part of the story. Asian labour in the

[6] Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[7] Adam McKeown, 'Global Migration, 1846–1940', *Journal of World History*, 15, 2, (2004), 155–189; Philip Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2008).

colonial era, he argues, was 'mobile but unfree'. Breman shows that colonial states and European capitalists used all of the means of coercion at their disposal, including the reinforcement of older indigenous forms of bondage, to uproot people and whole communities from the impoverished countryside in order to work in the modern plantation sector. Colonial stereotypes played their role, too: by representing migrants as 'the worst and weakest in society, human refuse for whom there was no place', colonial states ensured that 'the use of compulsion' to force people to move 'became not only acceptable, but even desirable'.[8]

The challenge for historians lies in specifying the nature of this coercion, while also identifying its limits, and looking for the many ways in which Asian migrants retained a margin of freedom in their journeys: freedom to choose their destinations and to make new lives for themselves. Under constraint, Asian migrants made sense of their journeys, sought to shape more secure futures for themselves and their families, and asserted claims to public respect and to specific rights. Migrants found a measure of freedom in their creation of sacred landscapes on the plantations and on the city streets. They could and did participate in the public sphere of print and performance; they mobilized politically; they asserted, in the smallest ways in everyday life, their autonomy and their identity.

At every stage, we need to ask very specific questions about coercion, constraint, and liberty: how were migrants recruited? Who paid for their passages? What kinds of powers were responsible for migrants and their welfare? How was the enforcement of debt obligations and contracts organized, and what were the consequences for breaching these obligations? Were they legal – enforceable by courts – or did they rely on forms of communal sanction?[9] These questions are as relevant to the study of contemporary migration in Asia as they are to that of the nineteenth century.

Diasporas and Cultural Change

As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling.
J.S. Furnivall

Migration is central to the cultural history of modern Asia. Migration allowed cultures, ideas, and institutions to travel across the continent.

[8] Jan Breman, *Labour Migration and Rural Transformation in Colonial Asia* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1990).

[9] Walton Look Lai, 'Asian Diasporas and Tropical Migration in the Age of Empire: A Comparative Overview', *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 5 (2009), 28–54.