WORKING PAPERS ON ASIAN LABOUR

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LABOUR MIGRATION IN ASIA

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Suggestions for a Research Agenda

Jan Breman

Introduction: The Relevance of History

The countries in the wider Asian region were until recently characterized as peasant societies. A very large part of the population used to work in agriculture and to live in villages. There was no reason, according to this stereotyped image, to look for employment outside the peasant mode of existence which was also highly localised.

Since the proposed theme of study is basically focussed on contemporary Asia there is no need to concentrate on the pre- or even early colonial landscape. Still the conventional notions about the peasantry (as engaged only or mainly in agriculture) and peasant immobility (as conceptualised in the timeless village community) are in need of revision.

Our proposition is that Asia in the past should be described and analysed as frontier societies with a highly mobile rural population and a workforce internally differentiated along social lines (differential access to land) and economic lines (in addition to agriculture a wide variety of trades and crafts). The idea first expressed by Eric Wolf of a process of peasantisation (increasing importance of agriculture) and immobilisation (captivitiy within the local order) under colonial rule is of relevance here.

Nevertheless, in the course of the nineteenth century large-scale labour migration took place. The increased mobility was only to a certain extent urban directed. The new metropoles that emerged were in the first place sites of colonial control (bureaucratic and military in nature) and of transfer (import/export of commodities) but not of industry. Capitalism mainly came to Asia in a rural manifestation, plantations and mines in particular. This explains why most migrants, labelled as coolies, from the rural hinterland went to destinations, within the country or abroad, which had a rural character. Our contention is that the large-scale enterprises which arose were indeed industrial in nature and that conditions of employment, although quite often unfree, were based on capitalist principles.

Labour was made mobile also for infrastructural development: building harbours, urban utilities, railways, roads, canals and dams while part of this workforce became engaged in the new transport technology as dockworkers, railwaymen, truck drivers, etc. The coolies and the navvies, prototypes of labour migrants, are until today understudied figures in the colonial landscape.

Our recommendation is that the research to be carried out on current modes of work, labour

and employment should take into consideration the type of regimes in which they originated. How else would it be possible to describe and analyse **change** and to deny the absurd idea that labour migration or, for that matter, globalisation are recent events?

Types of Mobility

If it ever was a proper label, the people in most Asian countries do not any longer live in a peasant economy and society. Their depeasantisation can be defined in social, economic and spatial terms.

Social differentation. The trend has been in the first place towards growing differentation of the peasantry. No doubt, the homogeneity of the rural population in the past has for a long time been exaggerated. Still, in the course of the last one century the distribution of land and other forms of capital has probably become more skewed than before. At the back of the rapid growth of landpoor and landless peasants are both economic and demographic factors. Consequently, the need for waged labour has sharply risen.

Economic diversification. In the second place for most regions in Asia there is a trend in the post-colonial era towards diversification of the rural economy. The size of agricultural production in total economic activity has gone down while employment and output in the secondary and tertiary sectors has drastically gone up. One of the results is an increase in occupational multiplicity.

Spatial mobility. Partly as a consequence of economic growth Asia has lost its age-old character as being essentially a rural society. The process of urbanisation has accelerated to the extent that there are already countries where more than half of the people live in towns and cities. This shift is naturally accompanied by major changes in the composition of the workforce.

Destination and Duration

Most studies on labour migration seem to have focused, and often for good reasons, on the **rural-urban** linkage and further also concentrate on people leaving the place of origin in order to settle down elsewhere, in the city, more or less permanently. According to this view migration is a type of movement which is rather short-term and leads to indefinite settlement again and which is usually accompanied by occupational change.

For a long time not much attention has been paid to **rural-rural** migration. There is much

more literature on village out-migration than on in-migration for work. Intra-rural mobility has been going on for a very long time and has taken many shapes ranging from peasant colonisation to participating in a regionally based cycle of harvest operations or going for non-agricultural work such as brickfields, stone quarries, saltpans and other rural industries.

Most forms of work migration in Asian countries are circular. The trek to the city or within the countryside and to foreign destinations as well, is for limited time periods and usually ends again in the place of origin. Seasonal migration is the most important variation of this circular movement. Our argument is that **labour circulation** should be understood against the background of informal sector employment, both rural and urban. We are dealing with a highly flexibilised workforce.

Recruitment and Return

How is the connection made between the point of departure and arrival? Not always does the migrant know where to go and what to do. The information available before going out and the support structure (kin or neighbours, ethnicity, co-believers and other particularistic bonds) on both sides to a large extent determine the course, direction and outcome of the decision to migrate. Non-migration should not be taken for granted but also is in need of explanation.

The migration may be individually based or involve more members of the household, organised in gangs lead by a jobber. Sometimes family members rotate and replace each other or act as chains for the mobilization of more labour power from the same household or family.

Why do migrants return and how has their absence helped them and their dependents to improve or even consolidate their social and economic status?

Passage

There have been important changes in bridging distance. One should not only think of buses, trucks, trains and planes but also of bicycles in making people more mobile on a wider scale. Has motorisation indeed lengthened migratory routes? At least as important as means of transport is the introduction of new forms of communication in spreading news about work and income available at a distance.

Our assumption is that the modern transport and communication technology help to explain why the dominant pattern of migration continues to be circulation.

Migration and Social Identity

Work migration is the mother and father of social inequality. By that statement we mean to say that migration starts from a differentiated situation. The social class of the migrant already predicts for what type of work the migrant has been qualified, equipped or not with education/skills and other forms of capital. The outcome of migration leads to further inequality in the sense that the most successful are able to further improve the economic and social status of the household to which they belong, while in the lower echelons of the work hierarchy migration does rarely result in structural improvement for the migrant and his/her family.

Employment

In contrast to the pattern of industrialisation and urbanisation which shaped the modern Atlantic world it seems that in Asia the labour market remains in a state of flux. Huge armies of labour continue to be on the move simply because in most cases employment is casual, conditioned by short term arrangements or even based on instant recruitment and dismissal. Not only men, but also women and children have been made mobile. Although in many cases footloose, these are not free labourers able to go wherever and whenever they want.

Many have been contracted through advance payment which binds them to an employer or his agent, the jobber. Others remain attached by systems of delayed payment permitting them only to leave at the end of “the job” or when the season is over. This footloose workforce can be found in the open air but is also “domesticated” and kept indoors, away from the public eye, in the multitude of sweatshops that form the backbone of the informal sector economy.

Although waged labour is far more important for migrants than self-employment, the first mode of payment is often hidden by practices of sub-contracting and piece work which prevail over time rates and regular hours of work.

The Migratory Life

Circular migrants often have to keep a low profile because, although their periodic presence is required in order to keep the economy growing, they are considered a nuisance in the public sphere because of their poor, dirty and undignified looks. Their very appearance can be a source of irritation in that it detracts from or at least pollutes the glamour of the rising levels

of consumption enjoyed by all those who lead more settled lives and have steady jobs and higher incomes. Their miserable terms of employment are reinforced by their inadequate shelters at the end of the work day or night.

They camp along the road, in the open fields, on the construction sites where they work or against the sheds in which they sweat. In narrating the plight of this floating workforce too much emphasis is sometimes placed on material deprivation. Utter loneliness, lack of care and emotional comfort are equally critical features of their misery.

Protection and Legislation

The vulnerability of migrants is aggravated by the lack of any organisation which could help them to resist the harsh labour regime. Established trade unions, representing formal secor interests, are indifferent if not downright hostile to what they consider to be a reserve army of casual intruders poaching in work domains where they do not belong and have no right to demand representation. In essence, the same negative attitude is shown by government, even by official agencies that are set up and mandated to strengthen the extremely weak bargaining position of migratory workers. On paper there is in some countries an endless repertoire of legal stipulations, but political will and administrative capability, both minimally required for implementing such rules and regulations, are sadly lacking. The liberated market economy has created a coolie class of greater magnitude than existed ever before.

Our strong recommendation is to encourage research on the interrelation between labour migration and the informal sector highlighting the circular, casual, contractual and gendered nature of the workforce.

Migrant Labour Brokerage and the Road to Work

Otto van den Muijzenberg

Introduction

In the division of labour agreed upon by Jan Breman, Ben White and myself I will discuss possibilities for research on three aspects of labour mobility, viz. The role of brokerage, the technological conditions of movement and communication, and the impact of outmigration on labour-sending societies.

Before engaging in these issues it should be stated that no review of the literature was possible, and apart from a few specific cases no references will be given. Furthermore a few more general questions should be mentioned which crossed my mind when preparing these notes.

In the preceding phases of meetings and papers the concepts of labour and mobility have more or less been taken for granted. But the research programme *Changing Labour Relations in Asia*) will get more focus by clarifying such key concepts.

Labour mobility: the papers written as yet seem to assume that *labour* implies physical, manually performed work, done by the lowest paid people in the economy.[1] We also find a broader definition, with labour as a factor of production, opposed to capital, and implying that people collectively denoted as "labour" lack access to the other factors of production. Put differently: they are working for others in a wage dependent quality. This perspective would encompass a much larger population. Do we then consider all wage dependent people as "labour", including those who produce services, including services requiring high levels of training? This would include employees, but also professionals like doctors, nurses, engineers, computer software specialists, even bank managers who have contracts with employers specifying their wages or salaries (and perks).

Another question is: will the programme opt for one common definition of labour, or allow sub-projects to develop their own? If the broader definition of labour is then considered too broad, how do we delimit it? Do we choose the manual-non-manual distinction, or a ceiling in

1. E.g. the paper "Aim of the workshop" recognises (p 3) : "Workers are themselves not a homogeneous entity. Some are absorbed into large factories, some are in household production, yet others form the seamless mass of 'footloose labour'", the examples suggesting the "manual labour" type of definition. On p. 6, under 5. Labour Legislation etc.. we find a reference to workers in "non-factory workplaces", which might lead to the "wider labour concept", but also to students and intellectuals as categories apparently or at least not *prima facie* belonging to the category of labour (that might be mobilised in labour movements).

for instance wage level, particular forms of job security, some level of education needed to perform the work required?

In case sub-projects will use their own definition, a suggestion would be to make the definition of labour in its tempo-spatial significance itself part of the research, i.e. to allow for an *emic* approach, which might lead to various outcomes according to country, or even region and social class. This may, in turn, be detrimental for the **comparative aspect** of the programme as a whole.

When talking about *mobility* we should distinguish between territorial or horizontal mobility (migration) and social mobility or vertical mobility. In most migration literature it is taken for granted that a change of social position takes place with spatial displacement, but apart from a check on quantifiable variables like occupation, income, educational performance there is little literature about the exact meaning of the migratory shift from, for instance, the position of eldest son of a rice tenant in a village to being a construction labourer in a city. Does it involve vertical mobility, up or down, and against what context do people evaluate this, and how will the researcher go about it?

Labour Brokers

In most literature on labour migration some mention is made on the ways in which the recruitment of labour takes place, but seldom do such references go beyond a summary indication that brokerage takes place one way or another. It is proposed here to make a survey of types of labour brokerage, both contemporary and historical , and on the basis of that organise a workshop which in turn might lead to further research into specific contemporary forms of labour brokerage.

One may hypothesise that the origin, organisational scope and form of the labour brokerage function differs in time as well as type of labour involved. A few examples that come to mind are:

1 One of the earliest forms of brokerage may have been the **military and coolie labour draft**, which would often take place under coercion, e.g. the *polos* and *servicios* but also service in the priestly convents (by so-called *tanores)* for Spaniards in the Philippines, or the *heerendiensten* under the Dutch East India Company and the colonial state. Although the prevalence of such forms of labour mobilisation is known, the exact mechanism of selection and organisation by intermediary persons is seldom described. The mobilisation of people being one of the main pre- occupations of early colonial states the

political-administrative apparatus (village, districts chiefs) doubled as the main intermediaries, but how this worked out in daily practice deserves to be systematically and comparatively described and analysed on the basis of the voluminous historical monograph literature now available. As Ben White goes deeper into the issue of forced/coerced labour I will limit my further examples to forms of so-called "free" labour.

2 **Agricultural labour**, which may be distinguished into internally recruited and overseas plantation labour.

a) **Internal agricultural**: short-distance and short-time trekking of a seasonal nature, in connection with transplanting and/or harvesting of rice, or harvesting of sugar-cane. The labour brokers here may be of the Philippine *kabisilya* type: mostly women who form a group of (young) relatives and neighbours of both sexes whose labour they offer to rice-farmers in an area around their village of residence. Their activity is considered a special occupation, involving the organisation of transport apart from regulating the agricultural work to be done. Mostly living near the members of their work groups they may receive only a marginal extra income compared to that of a regular labourer, but by diversifying into money-lending and operation of a small village store they can enhance their claim on the money earned in the harvesting operation. The *kontratista* of the sugarcane cutting *sacadas* in the Philippine Visayas is reputed to take a sizeably larger share of his group's income than the rice *kabisilya,* and not to live in the place of recruitment.. The Javanese *penebas* combines the provision of labour to with the buying of the harvest from the farmer. The North Sumatran *pemborong* appears to diversify from trade, or estate operation into labour brokerage.

Although many authors devote some attention to such figures linking up labour demand and supply at short notice and distance I know of no systematic comparative study of these broker-entrepreneurial types, at least not in Southeast Asia.

b) **Internal long-distance**, long-time, mainly plantation labour: possibly disappearing due to increasing local availability of labour. One may think here of the Javanese recruited by labour agencies in coastal cities of Java for the plantations (and mines) in the Indonesian Outer Islands, in particular Sumatra, South Indians brought to Assam.

c) **Overseas long-distance** and long-time agricultural migration may have declined considerably in as well as from Asia, due to local population increase as well as tightening of national boundary control. The recruitment of Indian labour for Caribbean or Malaysian estates, or of Japanese and Filipino labourers for Hawaiian and California plantations would fall under this. Apart from foreman-type of recruitment what we saw here was

institutionalised recruitment by agents of shipping lines, if not direct agents of the employers, sent overseas to recruit an allocated number of suitable labourers and accompany them to their destination. Still, such labour movements continue for instance between Java and peninsular Malaysia.

3 **Domestic labour** mainly in urban settings, which may also be separated into within-country and foreign-destination labour. The former most commonly has been recruited through private (kinship, friendship, collegial) channels, but particularly in large cities the phenomenon of domestic labour agencies has spread. Unlike in the case of agricultural labour one may not surmise that the owners of such agencies "have risen from the ranks", rather one might seek their origin in a more or less established middle class. In the past two decades some of them have diversified in the trade in domestic labour to other Asian countries like the Gulf countries, Singapore, Hongkong, Malaysia, Japan, or even beyond, North America, or Europe (where the domestics are often presented as *au pair girls* in order to circumvent increasingly strict immigration laws). An interesting development to study here is the growth of international inter-agency links.

4 **Factory labour** , which is as often as not organised through recruiters. In many cases the flow of applications is ample enough for a factory management to fill its labour requirements without having to resort to intermediary recruiters, in other cases, like the Bombay textile industry, jobbers play a role in providing, or limiting, access to work.

5 **Construction labour**, organised and delivered by foremen, sometimes brought together by higher-level brokers called contractors or k*ontratistas* in the Philippines, or *mukadam in India*. Migratory construction labour has a long history within Asian countries. Often organised in gangs under foreman they tended to migrate from project to project, often loosely connected to a super-foreman with good connections in the world of real estate development. A new dimension arose particularly in the past three decades when construction labourers became a sizeable proportion of all overseas labour. The literature is often rather vague the precise differentiation within the category, as well as the forms under which the needed skill and expertise levels together in the way the employer required it. Korean contractors with construction expertise in and around Vietnam in the sixties and seventies transferred more or less integrally to the Middle East after 1975, but gradually their "turn key" type of operation faded out, and more diverse recruitment brought large numbers of unskilled as well as skilled and specialised construction workers from India, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Indonesia to the oil rich countries.

Subcontracting both in tasks and types of labour developed, so much so that a complicated pattern developed, more recently geared to maintenance rather than building activities. In most sending countries governments involved themselves through regulation as well as active brokering, with more or less success. Middle Eastern governments did little in terms of brokerage, but more in issuing strict regulations, preventing any long-term possibility of settling. As the oil-boom financed construction boom petered out a sizeable diversification among the immigrants took place, mostly intermediate by labour brokers as well.

6 **Service workers**: restaurant, entertainment workers, musicians, dancers, sex workers, all having their own forms of sometimes overlapping labour brokerage. Particularly Thai and Filipino labourers are reputed active in these fields, and their destinations reach far beyond Asia, although Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore attract sizeable numbers, under diverse arrangements but normally intermediate as well by some form of brokerage. Some work has been done on this form of migratory labour in Europe as well.

7 **Highly skilled labour**, including engineering, medicine, nursing, computer science. In the nineteen seventies the literature concerning the so-called brain drain problematic became quite voluminous, but the interest in the topic waned after this. The suggestion from that, mostly macro-level work is that such migrants mostly find their own way, if need be through kin or friends, but hardly through "brain-brokers". A review of the literature might yield a different picture.

Even though the labour forms 2-7 suggest that the labourers are free agents, who may decide to offer or not to offer their labour power to an employer or a labour broker, the relationship between brokers and "their" workers should be closely scrutinised. In many cases the links between them may turn out to be multi-stranded and possibly severely constraining the freedom of choice of the labourer. The links between brokers and the state should also be a major focus of interest. Not only does the post-colonial state regulate some forms of labour recruitment (in particular when it involves border-crossing movement). One may also surmise that brokers seek the support of the state in enforcing conditions of employment which may sometimes be way under an acceptable level, or differ between the initial contract signed and the definitive document produced in case of conflict between worker and broker. On their part, migrant workers may try to appeal to the state in case the conditions of employment are violated. In the international setting, labour attachés at embassies and consulates in many cases

seem to prefer good, i.e. quiet diplomatic relations, however, above defending their compatriots. Control over renewal/extension of passports appears to be a very powerful controlling weapon.

Although private labour brokerage seems to prevail in numerical terms, this is not always and everywhere the case. Particularly in the early stages of long-distance recruitment state agencies may play a considerable, if not monopolistic, role. The Philippine state, for instance, in the seventies tried to completely control the increasing stream of labour migrants towards the Gulf states, as well as the stream of remittances attached to it. It was not able to effectively implement its endeavour, due to resistance from established brokers as well as the sheer size of the task.

Brokerage may be analysed along a scale of level of organisation, starting with relatively simple one-man/woman recruiters who link close network-partners from their region/village like kin, neighbours, or friends of friends, to a distant employer. On the other extreme of the scale one might position the incorporated multi-national labour recruitment firm with agencies in several countries. An interesting question to be discussed in a comparative fashion is whether size and level of organisation of brokerage increased as the "Asian Miracle" developed.

Labour brokerage is first of all a form of "business", but research might also look into less economically motivated forms of labour brokerage, which may for instance be related to religious affiliation. The case of the Philippine Iglesia Ni Christo comes to mind, where employers, seldom belonging to this church, entertain relations with a local leader of the church who "delivers" labourers to for instance a textile factory or an agricultural estate and promises labour peace at low wages in return for the monopoly of placement.

Research questions about all these intermediary figures would also focus on vertical mobility question like: where they come from, how they operate their business and link up with their workers as well as their employer-customers, how they fund their activities, what connections they maintain with governmental agencies which may partly compete with them, partly support them, and whether they diversify their labour-brokering into other fields (e.g. the penebas veering into paddy-buying, or the construction labour contractor going into real estate development).

PROPOSAL: Using the labour broker as a point of departure, a rather neglected part of the labour migration process might receive the attention it needs. On the basis of a systematic perusal of monographic literature a *postdoc* might build up a research project focusing on contemporary forms of informal and formal labour brokerage. In this project I would recommend special attention for the multi- and transnational aspects of the manifold forms of brokerage involved.

Several authors who did devote some attention at least to the phenomenon might be called upon to reinterpret their data and write a paper on the specific topic of labour brokerage in their field of research should be invited by the postdoc for a conference from which a book should emanate.

The Road Labour Migrants Travel

A historical question that intrigues me is how changes in transportation and communication technology have affected migratory patterns (from oxcarts to jumbojets, from dictated letters to mobile phone, fax, Email communication). It is obvious that the faster and larger the means of transportation, the larger the streams of migrants may be. We are surely witnessing an enormous scale enlargement and intensification of migrant flows.

But while at first sight the laying out of a road or the construction of an airport and permitting airlines to use it may be seen as commonplace material conditions just providing for speedier transportation, at closer sight a more sociological dimension is attached. Such material conditions for transportation connection may be controlled so as to promote some, and hinder some other "flows". Checkpoints may be instituted which control not only the flow of goods (logs, tobacco, rice etc.) but also people with/without certain characteristics. Most strikingly this comes to the fore when we look at airports, where permitting overseas workers to leave may be attached to requirements like paying an exit tax, signing a promise to remit money through certain banks. At the reception side, governments may allow arrivals with certain qualifications (skin colour, language spoken, occupation, type of visa granted on departure) easy access, whereas others are closely screened as to for instance their employability.

In a more specific example Li Tana describes how the removal of state transport monopolies in Vietnam reduced dramatically the travel time as well as cost and particularly the hassle of queueing for a girl who wanted to visit her home province from Hanoi: "Undoubtedly these improvements have greatly benefited those who could not afford to move before, especially peasants [...]. Information flows even more easily and quickly".

But the trip itself should also be subjected to sociological scrutiny. Who pays for it, and how. Is the prospective employer involved, or even known, or does the migrant provide for his/her own fare? How does the cost of transportation relate to the expected earnings, cost of living and imagined "profit" from the trip? What behaviour is encouraged or tolerated on board, and what is frowned upon. Who is carrying the risk of the trip (maybe less obvious in the Boeing 747 age than a century or longer ago when sea travel brought more risks of

sickness/death on board).

The shorter duration of contemporary transportation has removed certain mechanisms of preparation for the arrival, like discussions between seasoned migrants and "green" youngsters, formation of work gangs on board. On the other hand rapid technological developments in the means of communication, i.e. real time communication through phone, fax, E-mail, may compensate for it. Instead of a "seasoning process" on board a ship or during long train trips, – not to mention oxcart trains moving for instance from Ilocos to Cagayan or Central Luzon in the Philippines – migrants may now communicate by phone or fax with relatives, friends, village-mates elsewhere on the globe in order to prepare for their arrival.

For more and more migrants the distinction between place of origin and place of destination becomes less and less clear. What may have started as a simple move from the country or, within the nation-state, the place, of birth to the place of work has in many cases become the beginning of a lengthy process of oscillating movements, made possible by modern means of transportation, train, car and in particular the aircraft. This may involve many more locations than the initial two, as lateral linkages between colleagues, marriages contracted, children having been born and grown up may lead the migrant for from the initial "landing place". Instead of the dichotomous model of area (village, district, municipality, province, country) of departure vis-à-vis that of destination we could better speak of a *migratory field* in which migrants move.

Such migratory fields may be different **in geographical scope** (cf. Lillian Trager´s rather restricted examples of circular migrants in and around Dagupan City in the Philippines,[2] Katy Gardner´s plea for seeing *desh and bidesh* (own vs. foreign country (in casu Bangladesh vs. Great Britain, London or the Middle East) as fluid categories,[3] or as different locations of the same society, or Katharyne Mitchell's "transnational subjects" moving between China, Canada, Hong Kong, Australia.[4]

In the latter case our attention is especially drawn toward the need for distinguishing migratory fields with regard to **socio-economic level**. Even though a minimal level of expenditure is required to move in such a regional, national or transnational migration field the possibility to do so is not just a matter of money, but much more of connections, in particular kin connections, who may provide housing, food, and access to jobs. It may be obvious that work focusing on transportation and communication will show close links to the brokerage

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2. Lillian Trager, *The City Connection*.
3. Kathy Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
4. Katharyne Mitchell, "Transnational Subjects: Constituting the Cultural Citizen in the Era of the Pacific Rim Capital", in: Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (eds), *Ungrounded Empires: the Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 228-256.

issue outlined above.

The study of migratory fields implies a study of physical infrastructure permitting, promoting or hindering movement and communication. Inadvertently leaving out this infrastructure the Articulatory Migrant Network (AMN) approach as formulated by Kearney may be of some use in analysing long term development of particular migratory streams, their internal differentiation, scope of destinations, relationships with institutions. Whether or not his claim that a profit-loss calculations may be made on a comparative basis remains to be seen.[5]

PROPOSAL: There seems to be an increasing interest in the social scientific approach to technology, in particular means of transportation and communication. Some suggestions have been made to develop an "anthropology of the road", and similar tendencies may develop in the fields of air travel, airports. Retrospectively a historical anthropology/sociology of (steam)ship travel may be further developed (historians have made sizeable contributions here already, e.g. on the trips made by VOC ships between Holland and Asia, or, beyond Asia, on slavery shipping from Africa to the Caribbean). As of now, this theme might be taken into account by participants in the programme. I see no immediate "volume" of knowledge sufficient to organise a workshop and/or postdoctoral research project. Freek Colombijn, IIAS fellow as of January 1998, however, may be approached to specifically look into further possibilities here.

Labour Mobility and Skill Formation

Much of the literature is negative about the "feedback" of labour migration on the sending areas and societies. Although remittances in many cases are acknowledged as a more or less important economic contribution to the survival of those staying behind, little credit is given to the long-term developmental role of the migratory phenomenon. Often complaints are added about the distortions caused by the predominantly consumptive spending that families afford themselves. Grudgingly it is admitted that at least housing improvements belong to a standard pattern, and *pucca* houses of urban-looking architecture are even used as prima facie indicators for the occurrence of long distance, particularly overseas migration. Other complaints refer to the inflatory effect of agricultural land buying by migrants or their families, sometimes mitigated again by the remark that at least a considerable part of the remittances is also devoted to education of children. Apparently a rather mechanistic relationship between

5. Michael Kearney, "From the Invisible Hand to Visible Feet: Anthropological Studies of Migration and Development", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15 (1986), 331-361.

education and development is surmised to exist. Again, various views exist about the skills and changed attitudes, for instance on the need of modernisation, returning migrants bring back into their community of origin. An example of the state of knowledge regarding Philippine return migration may be quoted: One of the reviews of overseas migration in the Philippines remarks that ..."no studies have been done in the Philippines on whether returnees are productive workers, or mostly dependents such as retirees and the elderly. Nor is there information in whether or not return migrants bring back useful skills. Fragmentary evidence elsewhere shows that few additional skills are acquired and these skills are often unsuitable to conditions in the sending country...immigrant returnees may...have an unfavourable influence on the sending society in that they bring back materialistic values and often demand imported consumer goods, thereby shifting attention away from productive investments".[6]

The assessment of impacts of migration on the sending communities largely focuses on the economic aspects of the process, and efforts are made to quantify the effects in terms of enlarged consumption, changes in consumption (food, household appliances, clothing styles) pattern. The more social and cultural sides have been much less systematically investigated, leaving the field open for overly pessimistic as well as optimistic perspectives. The methodology of socio-cultural impact assessment of a complicated phenomenon like out-migration and return migration still needs further improvement.

Much of the existing literature containing this type of information refers to rural settlements, but it should not be forgotten that many returnees do not settle anymore in their village of origin, but remain in a (big) city, where they may strike out on the basis of skills gained during their migratory years in a way which is utterly impossible in the countryside. Take for instance the Filipina nurse who works several years overseas, trains for computer science in Canada and the Netherlands, returns to Manila to set up a software consultancy firm. In her town of origin clientele for the latter would not be available at all.

If the migratory field/AMN approach mentioned above is followed we may decide that a statement like Cariño's may be too pessimistic, because he seems to refer to the *village* or rural society where the impact of return migration should be measured, whereas useful application of skills gained may take place in a *city environment.* Undoubtedly, this may, in the end result in aggravating urban biased patterns of national development, if not outright increased burdens of reproduction shifted onto the rural population.

PROPOSAL: It might be a good component of the CLARA programme to make a systematic

6. Benjamin V. Cariño, "International Migration from the Philippines: Policy Issues and Problems" in: Alejandro Herrin (ed.), *Population, Human Resources and Development.* (Quezon City: UP Press and UPCIDS, 1994), Vol. 2, 785-816, here 806.

inventory of data and opinions as formulated in scores of monographs regarding migratory places studied by social scientists at close range. Apart from case studies on individual “return careers” attention should be devoted to the reception of successful (richer, more skilled) as well as less successful (no win-no loss or even loss) returnees in the economic and local political settings. This “state-of-the art” report might be organised by trying to motivate masteral students to write a thesis based on library research on one, or several contiguous, countries in Asia (depending on the volume of literature available). On the basis of such work some of them might develop a proposal for Ph.D. work. All could participate in a comparative workshop on “The Economy and Cultural Economy[7] of Return Migration in Asia”.

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7. Raul Pertierra (ed.), *Remittances and Returnees: The Cultural Economy of Migration in Ilocos* (Quezon City: New Day, 1992) tries to bring the regional value system of the Ilocos provinces of the Philippines into the discussion by proposing to analyse migration (and staying) in terms of “cultural economy” in which the “view of the good life” plays a central role. This approach, although not completely new, might be fruitfully checked against the available monographic literature.

Asian Labour Mobility and Migration: Three Proposals for Discussion

Ben White

Introductory/General

This short note is intended – like other background papers requested by the workshop organizers – to stimulate discussion and the identification of priorities for the collaborative research programme on *Changing Labour Relations in Asia* (CLARA).[1] It proposes a limited number of topics within the general theme of "labour mobility"; other aspects under this general theme will be introduced in the papers and presentations of van den Muijzenberg and Breman, following a division of labour agreed between us.

Migration and labour mobility (both spatial and sectoral, domestic and international) are nothing new in Asia.[2] However, recent decades have seen important changes in both the contexts and causes of mobility, its mechanisms and processes, and its impact on the areas of origin and destination of migrants. Closely related to all this is the enormously reduced importance of (geographical) distances in determining the boundaries of labour markets, both because of improved transport and communications technologies but also because of the role of "globalization" in promoting the general decline of all kinds of barriers, including institutional ones, to the rapid movement of information, money and labour.

The subject of "labour mobility" involves a very wide range of issues, – even if we restrict ourselves to those close to the CLARA programme's general focus on "(changing) labour *relations*" – and most of them cannot be seen in isolation from other major themes on the workshop agenda: labour process, gender, labour consciousness, labour movements. Many scholars in and outside Asia are, or have been, at work on these issues and it may not be an easy task for the CLARA programme to identify topics on which new research, conferences/workshops and publications need to be stimulated.

A first general suggestion is that the CLARA programme should aim, in all its activities, to go beyond single-country research and aim specifically to promote *comparative analysis within Asia*, sometimes through sponsoring new research but in particular by sponsoring a series of comparative workshops, bringing together scholars who have worked on similar

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1. Other main themes to be covered in the workshop are: labour process; gender; labour consciousness; labour law and labour movements.
2. See Jan Breman's paper for this workshop.

themes in different Asian countries.

The notes below include three specific proposals for workshops, two involving intra-Asian comparative studies and one involving Asian/European comparisons. I had not originally intended to be so specific at this point, but being unable to participate physically in the Workshop I have put on paper some ideas which otherwise I might have voiced more hesitantly in the discussions. Hopefully participants will be able to improve on these proposals and/or to link them with others emerging during the workshop. The topics mentioned, I think, would also be well-suited to post-doc and PhD research projects.

No attempt is made to summarize or review relevant literature; rather than a partial and unbalanced set of citations and references, I have decided to give none at all. If specific aspects of labour mobility become an important focus of the CLARA programme, and where the relevant literature reviews do not already exist, younger researchers may perhaps be encouraged to undertake this work.

"Unfree" Labour in the Age of the "Free" Market: Comparative Aspects of Asian Labour Immobility

It may seem paradoxical to begin with considerations of labour *im*mobility. The purpose is to raise some important issues relating to forms of labour which – although they often do involve involuntary physical migration of labour – restrict or bar the circulation of certain categories of male and female, adult and juvenile labour power within the labour market, and which show no signs of disappearing in the face of contemporary "free" market forces. They therefore deserve discussion in the workshop – whether in this or another session.

These forms of labour are usually bundled together in the convenient rubric "unfree" labour, a notion which suffers from the problems of all negative definitions, defining forms of labour by what they are not rather than by what they are, but hangs basically on the role of "non-economic" (physical, politico-legal) forms of labour compulsion. "Unfree" labour thus spans a wide continuum, from outright slavery, through forced labour to various forms of bonded and tied labour. All of these forms are to be found in Asia, some of them in very large numbers. A glance through recent issues of Anti-Slavery Reporter, for example, turns up reports on such issues as:

– Forced labour imposed by states, local authorities, the military or local warlords in Burma, China and parts of Indonesia;
– Kidnapping and enslavement in Viet Nam;

– Trafficking in women (as involuntary brides and in the commercial sex trade) in China, Burma and Thailand;
– Forced labour in Taiwan's brothels by women from the islands small indigenous minority population;
– Bonded labour in agriculture, fisheries and/or rural industries in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the philippines;
– in many countries of South, Southeast and East Asia, domestic servants (often juveniles, and mainly female) working in conditions of extreme servitude, whether domestically or overseas.

Many or most of these situations involve the involuntary "migration" of those involved to worksites far removed from their place of origin. It is important to underline that we are not speaking here simply of poor or exploitative working conditions (which can occur also in "free" labour relations, and have caused many authors, understandably but inaccurately, to write of relations of "servitude" and "slavery" in situations where those specific relations actually are absent);[3] but of forms of labour that are literally not free, where the worker, who often but not always had entered the labour relationship involuntarily, certainly does not have the possibility to leave it, being prevented by physical or other non-economic forms of coercion.

Many of these forms of labour are the subject of (national and international) NGO campaigns and interventions, but academic research on these topics has been quite unbalanced, both thematically and regionally. Certain forms of unfree labour have received quite thorough academic attention (historical, but not contemporary, slavery and forced labour; historical and contemporary forms of debt-bondage, but in Southern Asia particularly). However, much of our information on contemporary forms of unfree Asian labour has a "fact-finding" rather than analytic character, deriving from activists, NGOs and international organizations.

PROPOSAL I: WORKSHOP ON UNFREE LABOUR IN ASIA. A comparative workshop on these issues, covering East and Southeast Asian as well as the more familiar ground of South Asian unfree labour, could yield very interesting results. A successful workshop would require some preliminary steps. These would include identifying the relevant literature and scholars through searches of on-line data bases, internet sites, announcements in IIAS and other newsletters,

3. In "unfree" labour, conditions of labour – whether work-hours, remuneration or social security – are not always or necessarily worse than those of "free" labour, and that is indeed sometimes a reason for workers to enter into them, according to some authors.

and through personal contacts and networks. This could be done either by a division of labour among interested persons and/or by recruiting a graduate student to do this. On this basis a workshop could be planned and potential participants identified.

The workshop itself could have several aims, including

- to map out the terrain of contemporary unfree labour in Asia (with the help of a prior literature review, as noted above);
- to relate the realities and variations of contemporary Asian unfree labour to theories of unfree labour in transitional and capitalist development trajectories (and, I would say at a first impression, to provide some counterbalance to "south Asia bias" in recent discussions of unfree labour), and
- possibly to formulate a highly-focused research programme, selecting 1-2 specific forms and aspects of Asian unfree labour for detailed comparative study.

I suggest the following three areas for specific attention:

a. **(Debt) bonded labour**. Here there is something of a puzzle: why is debt-labour apparently so much more prominent in Southern than in Southeastern Asia, in the second half of the 20th century? Reports on rural conditions in the late colonial period in Southeast Asia (from French Indochina, British Burma, Netherlands Indies) all point to the chronic indebtedness of many small-peasant and landless-labour households and the complicated debt-labour (or debt-land-labour) relations in which they found themselves. Yet a few decades later, debt-bonded labour comes strongly to the fore in studies of rural labour (both agrarian, and rural industries) in south Asia but is rarely mentioned in Southeast Asia. What explains the apparently greater relative incidence of debt-/bonded labour in South Asia compared to Southeast Asia (at least in the second half of the 20th century) – or is this apparent contrast due partly to information bias and "labelling"?

   On the latter point, there is probably some need to re-think the concept of debt-labour. While many forms of debt-labour are exploitative in function, this may not always or necessarily be the case; the pledging of future labour against a present loan may be no more exploitative than salaried workers' mortgage and life-insurance arrangements, or the widespread practice of student loans, in industrialized countries. This points to the more general principle, that understanding of the dynamics of labour requires us to go beyond considerations of the formal structure of labour relations to examine their actual substance and function in specific contexts.

   Since bonded labour is now prohibited in most Asian countries, it is also interesting to

examine the experience of organized opposition to these forms of exploitation, by international, national and local bodies and/or by workers themselves.

b. **Forced/Compulsory labour: dynamics of corvée in contemporary Asia**. The use of compulsory labour by states, local authorities, the military or local warlords is another form of unfree labour which probably is subject to wide regional variation within Asia. Such labour is typically called on for infrastructure projects but may also be invoked for such tasks as portering. While the military and warlord variants are relatively unencumbered by ideological justifications, forced labour on behalf of local authorities is commonly justified with reference to communal traditions of mutual aid, community culture etc. (although the use of chains and leg-irons to encourage participation, as reported recently in Burma, is somewhat at variance with such notions). The social constructions of these "traditions" by which states and local authorities lay claim to the labour of citizens, and contrasts between countries in the strength and form of these practices, offer rich possibilities for comparative analysis.

c. **Trafficking in labour, particularly women and juveniles**. Here we talk of situations of near-slavery, in which not labour-power but persons are traded by brokers, sometimes domestically and sometimes across national borders, without labour-contracts, into conditions of near-slavery in the sex trade, domestic service, or other activities. While such practices invoke widespread outrage internationally, they appear to be well-rooted in many societies, raising questions about the basis of local relationships making possible the sale and brokering of persons in this way.

Labour Mobility and Migration as Gendered Processes

Theories of labour migration in general have neglected its gendered nature as an issue which, in various ways, cross-cuts almost every aspect of migration processes. A few studies, both historical and contemporary, in South, Southeast and Eastern Asia have begun to redress the general neglect of gender in migration analysis, and some of these have made explicit contributions to theory. This applies both to "distress" migration (e.g. that causes by seasonal rural poverty or natural disasters, and undertaken for survival purposes) as well as to "betterment" migration and circulation (for example, into informal-sector or industrial employment, and

generally involving the younger generation not of the rural poorest but of households somewhat above that level).

Both through engagement in rural and urban labour markets and in the "staying at home" roles often involving forms of feminization of economic activity in areas of origin, women are key agents in the economic and social transformations of which labour mobility is part. Gender issues therefore require attention in most if not all of the themes I and my colleagues have singled out for attention under the theme of labour mobility, as in all the other main themes of the CLARA programme.

How best to incorporate cross-cutting issues of gender in the CLARA programme's activities? "Gender and Changing Asian Labour Relations" is too broad a topic for useful workshops or edited research collections (although it might make a good topic for a major international conference with several specialized panels); "Gender and Asian Labour Migration" comes closer to the level at which a useful, focused contribution could be made. I will not discuss these issues further here (others in the workshop will have better suggestions than I can make) but instead would like to highlight and propose one specific priority theme, namely: *domestic service as a neglected sector of migrant labour in Asia.*

PROPOSAL II: WORKSHOP ON ASIAN MIGRATION AND THE RELATIONS OF DOMESTIC SERVICE. In many Asian countries, domestic servants (mainly, but not only, female) represent a much larger proportion of the labour force than industrial workers, yet proportionately have received much less attention from researchers. To these we should add the relatively recent phenomenon of large-scale international migration to domestic service, both within Asia and to other regions (particularly the Gulf States and North America).

The emergence of private domestic service as a mass phenomenon is closely related to periods of great inequalities in wealth and income in the history of specific countries; where local élite or middle-class wealth is not accompanied by large-scale mass poverty (Gulf states; Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia) international flows of migrant domestic servants from South & Southeast Asian countries often fill the gap. Although quite a number of studies have analysed these flows, concentrating on the migration/mobility aspects of domestic service – the process of recruitment, the impacts of out-migration and migrants' incomes on mobility in the communities of origin, etc. – there is as yet rather little work on the (changing?) *relations* of waged domestic service themselves. Labour relations (in recruitment and the workplace) have been relatively neglected, as have the relations between domestic labour and middle-class life-styles, and the attitudes of state bodies and the labour movement to these relations. This is in some contrast to studies of domestic labour in Northern Europe and North America by

social historians, who have often paid considerable attention to the labour-relations aspects of domestic service.

In some Asian countries at least, domestic service is not only a question of relations between the very rich and very poor. A recent study of child domestic workers in Indonesia, for example, found that one in eight employer households themselves were dependent on unskilled manual occupations. Among relatively low-income households, adult women's labour force participation may require employment of a domestic servant if children are attending school and thus not available for housework and care of younger children during much of the day.

A workshop focusing on the relational aspects of domestic service (both labour relations themselves and relations between life-styles and domestic service) could fill an important gap in the literature. Hopefully it could also cover the question of recent attempts at intervention in the relations of domestic service, including the efforts of domestic servants in some countries to organize themselves and gain recognition (and protection) as workers.

As in the case of proposal I, I would suggest a preliminary, terrain-mapping phase leading to a focused workshop.

Children and Youth on the Move: Asia's Young Workers and Labour Migration

It is generally agreed that Asia contains the greatest concentration of "child labour" (and, paradoxically, the majority of the world's "youth unemployment") in the world. In some parts of Asia (particularly former socialist countries and those most severely hit by structural adjustment programmes) more children than previously are working to support themselves or their families, and/or to remain in school in a world in which primary education is rarely free. In many countries globalization and the ideas on life-styles that come with it have helped to create a new kind of child labour: alongside the better-publicized cases of children forced into labour by parents, by unscrupulous labour recruiters or simply through absolute poverty, there are millions of Asian children who simply decide themselves to enter the labour market, with or without their parents' consent, in search of cash. In many countries, social differentiation and urbanization have simply made children's work not more prevalent but more visible, as it moves out of homes, peasant family farms and other family enterprises into wage-employment and onto urban streets. Children's mobility has increased, parallel to that of adults, and for the same reasons as summarized in the introduction to this note. In addition, it is probably the case that recent years have seen an increase in the worst forms of abuse and exploitation of children by adults: in prostitution, in bondage, in armed conflict, situations which amount to virtual or actual kidnapping or enslavement (with or without parents' consent), with terrible work

conditions often combined with physical abuse;[4] these are the kinds of child labour which, although representing a relatively small minority of working children, get (with good reason) into the newspapers, and which are used to great effect by organizations campaigning for the eradication of child labour, for boycotts of products made with child labour, etc.

The issue has become an extremely divisive one; serious disagreements about how the problem of "child labour" should be confronted actually reflect more fundamental disagreement about what the problem really is. There is a need, and through recent developments in research a greater possibility than previously, to go beyond fact-finding research and explore more carefully the meaning and value of work, work relations, and education in the lives of Asian chuldren and youth.

PROPOSAL III: WORKSHOP ON CHILDHOOD/YOUTH, WORK AND EXPLOITATION IN ASIA AND EUROPE.[5] "Child labour" in Asia is receiving increasing attention from researchers and activists, both locally and internationally. The whole area is full of so many questionable assumptions and rigid orthodoxies that sound, issue-oriented research and analysis (going beyond mere "fact-finding") takes on enormous current importance.

As the "child labour" debate gains momentum, the scope for serious academic reflection on the issue of children, youth and work becomes increasingly limited. With the prominent role taken by international organizations, national governments, trade unions and NGOs, academic research often becomes subservient to political discourse, with researchers expected to provide academic window-dressing in conferences where other interests, aiming to promote one or another political position (whether "abolitionist", "protectionist", "children's-rightist" or "cultural relativist") are in command. Too many of these debates still posit the superiority of the Northern experience, declaring it the standard against which all others must be measured. Universal, full-time compulsory education (combined with the total prohibition of child employment) is propagated as the panacea to remove children from labour and ensure their well-being; at the same time, those who look critically at the idea that work is not always destructive and (conventional) education not always the best option, are accused of denying the children of the poor the right to education and protection by the state.

Paradoxically, where working children themselves have the opportunity to become organized and voice their views, they have tended to firmly distance themselves from such orthodoxies, often claiming for themselves precisely the right to work and to earn money, and pressing for

4. Some, but not all, of these extreme abuses of children's capacity to work may also be covered under the themes of "unfree labour" and "domestic service" discussed in parts 1 and 2 of these notes.
5. This proposal is based on ideas worked out together with my colleague Olga Nieuwenhuys of the Institute of Development Research, University of Amsterdam.

changes that would enable them to combine work with education.[6]

As noted above, it is becoming both increasingly difficult (in the atmosphere of heated political debate on these issues), and increasingly important (in the light of new research exposing the mythical contents of current global "child labour" discourse), to explore more carefully the meaning and value of work, work relations and education in the lives of children and young people, in contexts which permit and indeed welcome the exploration of fresh or dissenting ideas. A number of in-depth studies along these lines have been undertake in recent years in various Asian countries[7] and could provide the basis for an important and innovative workshop; meanwhile, the validity of the original Northern orthodoxy itself is increasingly called into question by recent historical and contemporary research on children, youth, work and education in the North;[8] these developments point to the existence of diverse and legitimate ways to preserve childhood integrity without necessarily insisting on the removal of children from work, and also to some essential and unrecognized continuities between the realities and practice of child and youth upbringing in the South and the North.

A comparative workshop, in this case (unlike the other workshops I have proposed) specifically aiming to bring together researchers from Asian and European countries,[9] should aim to provide a forum for open discussion, informed as far as possible by empirical research rather than by current political discourse, on the issues involved in the child labour debate. The purpose is not to provide academic support for one or other political position but to promote a better understanding of the issues by linking them to broader debates (in the Asian and European context) on state and market, on social security and child/youth development, on global and local cultures of childhood, youth and work, on links between work and education, and on lessons to be (un)learned from the past.

Given its comparative Asian/European focus, support for such a workshop could probably be obtained from a number of sources (KNAW, EU etc.) as well as those specifically concerned with Asian Studies.

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6. See for example the petition of (female) child garment workers in Bangladesh in 1994 when thousands of children were fired from export garment factories in face of the threat of a US boycott: "please allow us to continue our light work for 5-6 hours a day and give us an opportunity to attend school for 2-3 hours a day"; or the "Kundapur Declaration" formulated by an international meeting of representatives of organized working children in 1996 which includes among its twelve points: "we are against exploitation at work, but we are in favour of work with dignity and appropriate hours, so that we may have time for education and leisure".
7. I am aware of such studies from India, Indonesia, The Philippines and Vietnam, and there are certainly others in progress in other Asian countries.
8. I am aware of recent studies on Belgium, Britain (several), Denmark, The Netherlands and Norway, also in former Soviet Union, and am sure that several other ongoing or recent studies can be identified.
9. "Europe" might after discussion be replaced by the "North" (or industrialized countries) making possible the inclusion of studies from Japan, North America, Australia/New Zealand, etc.