Debate

Sunil S. Amrith

*Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*

As Sunil Amrith states in the introduction to his book, it is a history of migration in modern Asia, written for anyone coming to the subject for the first time, and with students particularly in mind. It should therefore not be judged on any criterion other than that of providing a good, reliable and interesting introduction to the subject. In this respect, it serves its purpose well. Indeed, those coming to Asian migration studies for the first time, and many who have been involved in this area of knowledge for longer, will find much that enthrals in this account of the broad sweep of Asian migration history—from the mass movements of labourers and others during the colonial period in Asia to the complex mix of contract labour migrants, flows of professional and technical workers and students and refugee movements of recent decades.

I believe the key contribution of the book is in furthering the process of redressing the Eurocentric emphasis on the migration flows from Europe to the New World (and to a more limited extent the flows of slaves that accompanied this movement) over the past two centuries, by highlighting the vast movements of mainly Chinese and Indians to other parts of Asia since around 1850. As pointed out in the book, both flows arose from a shared set of initial stimuli. But Chinese migration was much more autonomous of the colonial state. Importantly, the vast numbers of Chinese and Indians involved in these movements produced a less striking permanent presence in the countries of destination than was the case for European migration to the New World, most of which was seen by its actors from the start as permanent movement. The Chinese who migrated both to Southeast Asia and to Manchuria saw themselves as sojourners rather than permanent migrants. And in the case of the Indian migrations, the indenture
system and later the *kangany* system ensured a vastly greater gross than net flow to the countries of destination.

The author of a 200-page book covering the entire sweep of modern Asian migration history (and the early part going back further in time to early modern Asia) cannot really be faulted for failure to develop various themes in more detail. Such a book necessarily has to skim briefly over many important issues. But every reader will have in mind aspects that are of particular interest and that could have been developed further. For me, there are two. The first is the changing sex ratio of Indian and Chinese migration in the early 20th century. The fact that both flows were essentially those of sojourners was related to the very small share of women in the movement, meaning that most of the men could not contemplate settling and forming a family unless it were by marrying local women (which some of them did, producing communities such as the *peranakan* and *baba* in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore). However, the proportion of women in the migration flows to Malaya (including Singapore) was beginning to increase in the 1920s, though it remained very small, particularly for the Indians. So the potential for the movements to become more permanent was building up—until it was cut short by the Great Depression, and the repatriation of Chinese and Indian labourers in the early years of the 1930s. It does not take much imagination to envisage a very different population structure in Peninsular Malaysia than that which we have today, if the Great Depression had never occurred, or even if it had been delayed by a decade, to coincide roughly with the outbreak of World War 2. We might then have had a population in which Indians, Chinese and Malays were in roughly equal proportions. The political implications in the lead-up to independence could have resulted in a very different outcome for the Malaysian state than we see today.

The second important aspect that might have been developed further is the role of Chinese and Indian diasporas in complicating relations between the Chinese and Indian governments and those of the countries of settlement. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, this has been a very prickly area for international relations, exacerbated by the strongly anti-Communist stance of the Suharto government but complicated by the key role of Chinese-Indonesian capital in many aspects of Indonesian development. The Chinese government, on its part, had great difficulty in coming
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to terms with the fact that what it viewed as *huaqiao*—“overseas Chinese”—were mostly citizens of foreign countries, not expatriate Chinese. Many Chinese Indonesians had totally lost the Chinese language. India has more recently set up a Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, which would benefit from studying the pitfalls faced by the Chinese state in relating to ethnic Chinese citizens of other countries.

The book is full of interesting snippets of information, such as the multiple possibilities canvassed on p. 47 for derivation of the word “coolie”. More weighty issues of contemporary concern are also addressed: India, Pakistan and Iran are highlighted as Asian states that host more refugees than Western states “that proclaim more loudly their humanitarian credentials”. At the same time, one could question the accuracy of certain statements in the book, notwithstanding their source in various published studies. Did the urban proportion of South Vietnam’s population really reach 65% in the American war period (p. 143)? Did squatters really make up about 25% of Singapore’s population in the early 1960s (p. 144)? Some indication of the present-day value of the 213 million Chinese dollars raised by the Chinese diaspora for war and relief efforts between 1937 and 1939 would have been useful (p. 102).

In the discussion of more contemporary migration flows, there is much more material to draw on, and it is easier to find areas that could have done with greater emphasis: for example, the calculated gamble, including significant levels of debt, which many of the labour migrants from South Asia and their families take in enabling them to work in the Gulf, in Singapore, and elsewhere. The gamble is that unless a follow-on contract can be secured, the debt incurred by many of them cannot be repaid, and their families sink deeper into poverty.

Overall, though, there is little to fault and much to praise in this ambitious book. I would not be surprised if some future scholars of Asian migration single out this book as having served to first whet their interest in the subject.

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This book is described on the back cover as a ‘magisterial survey’ and it is indeed that—a sweeping comprehensive well written account of migration in Asia since 1850. The author's thesis that migration has been at the centre of Asian history and not a peripheral or exceptional process is compelling and the argument is effectively made. The book is to be highly recommended to students of both Asian history but also those of migration. The historian’s perspective of recognising recurring and consistent themes, processes and connections across generations sheds important light on the contemporary highly dynamic migration situation in the region and this study is required reading for scholars of present day migration in the region.

A strength of the book is the identification of a number of themes which run through the 160 years spanned by the study. One of the most important of these is the fact that circularity, sojourning and reciprocity are dominant in Asian mobility patterns over the years. Although many accounts of population movement confine themselves to considering only permanent displacement and settlement migration, Amrith’s conceptualisation (page 3) is more complex and while concentrating on longer distance movement it takes full account of non-permanent mobility. Much of the myth of Asian immobility has its roots in the neglect of circular migration, both historically and in the current era.

Another, among many themes which struck this reviewer, was the recognition that environment and environmental change (both sudden disaster events and slow onset) has been a consistent driver of mobility in the region over many years. The current clamour over climate change and its potential impending impacts on migration in the region assume that such forces are new yet it is demonstrated here that environment has long been an important underlying cause of both permanent and non-permanent migration.

The book is organised around four distinct periods which the author skilfully demonstrates are both distinctively different but linked by continuities in mobility patterns and processes. The first period, 1850-1930, began with Asia's first great mobility revolution and reached a peak in the 1920s which was not matched until the 1990s. The 1930-50 period of Depression, War and decolonisation saw significant reductions in economic mobility but an increase in forced migration including refugees. The 1950-70 years were an era of substantial internal migration with the establishment of
newly independent nations, and the most recent era of globalisation has seen a second mobility revolution in which both internal and international migration have seen a florescence. Incidentally, the author’s insistence that much of the distinction between internal and international migration is misplaced is refreshing.

To this reader it is the chapters which deal with the pre-1970 era which are the strongest. One is struck by the sheer scale of some of the historical shifts of population of India and China, both internally and their migration to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. India and China are dominant in the historical narrative, as would be expected, but the author weaves their experience together in such a way as to develop strong and consistent patterns and processes. However, other Asian countries are not neglected. These chapters demonstrate clearly how important elements of contemporary migration in Asia have historical antecedents—the role of the migration industry, efforts by government to restrict forms of movement, the role of the haj, the role of networks, contract labour migration, migrant associations, student migration, mega cities as multicultural foci of migration etc. These insights are of importance as we seek to understand the complexities of contemporary migration.

Given the expansive canvas over which this book extends, it seems carping to draw attention to omissions but to this reader the fact that the study confines itself to migration within Asia is a limitation, albeit a very understandable one. Migration linkages between Asian countries with Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere are not only highly significant today when Asian countries are the main sources of migrants to most OECD countries. The historical migration linking Asia to the rest of the world has also been significant.

The least satisfying part of the book to this reader was that dealing with the post-1970 period. While the author has certainly drawn attention to the key moments, both those which build on established corridors and new forms of movement, I felt there were a few gaps. There is little about undocumented migration yet it is of major significance. Related to this there is little discussion of the increasing engagement of governments on migration beyond the discussion on the Philippines. The fact that the policing model of migration still dominates in the region when there is a need to have a management model which accepts that migration is an inevitable structural part of the economics of the region. There is nothing on the emerging
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attempts to develop policies and strategies to engage with diaspora—the India and Chinese initiatives are especially notable. The shift in China away from focusing on return migration to instead encouraging the diaspora to remain overseas but engage actively with China. There is only a little on remittances. There is no discussion of the increasing academic and policy focus on the ‘migration and development’ issue, especially the belief that in a congenial policy context migration can have beneficial effects on origin countries. There is also no discussion of public perceptions and media representatives of migration and migrants in Asia which are often negative and stereotyping and scapegoating is prevalent. The discussion on poverty and migration is limited.

Yet it is a difficult task to encapsulate the post-1920 period in 42 pages given Asia’s scale and complexity and the massive social, economic and demographic change that has swept over the region in the last few decades. I did find it a little surprising that there is no mention (that I could find) on one of the largest global migration flows—from Bangladesh to India.

These comments should not detract from the conclusion that this is an excellent study. To the non-historian reader it is redolent with insights into the current migration situation. The author has shown an admirable capacity to synthesise a wealth of information into a coherent, compelling and important story.

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* This is the first draft of a promising book manuscript. That it is no more than that must be blamed on both author and publisher. Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia addresses the theme of migration across and within the continent of Asia in the period 1850-2010. Survey pieces, and especially book-length ones, are far harder to write than monographs, and it takes a brave academic indeed to attempt one of so broad a scope as this. However much a reader might admire the ambition and politics of the attempt, its execution is shoddy. The book is badly written and badly arranged; fragments of a story appear, only to disappear swiftly again, and when and if they do
reappear, it is a test of the reader’s memory as to whether he can remember the earlier reference.

A major problem is that of delineating premises of selection and treatment. People move, and have always moved, the book tells us; borders and nation-states came later. Then why ‘Asia’? And why ‘migration’? ‘Asia’ is, the author acknowledges, where ‘Europe’ ends (16)—it ‘takes on real meaning from concrete journeys such as those described in this book’ (16-17). There are ‘many Asias’ (17). Asia was ‘a particularly dense space of interaction’—and an intra-Asian ‘intensity’ of interaction was greater than outside Asia (17). ‘Migration’ is ‘shorthand for different kinds of mobility’ (2). ‘Migrant’ can be a category imposed on someone who has no (longer any) connections with the land of his ‘forebears’, or has cut them (4) (and we should, presumably, refer to them as in ‘diaspora’, although this could raise the question of the classical ‘diaspora’ idea being borrowed from Judaism, whose liturgy, later drawn upon by Zionism, refers to the yearning for ‘return’). ‘Sojourning’—moving back and forth from a place of origin, and eventually perhaps returning—the author tells us, is more common to Asian migrants than to Europeans (4); why this is the case, and why ‘Europe’ keeps making an appearance as comparator, remains unclear.

For an academic book, this is one that is incredibly sparsely footnoted, which is a problem if we are to believe that it can be used as an introductory work into larger literatures. Some quotes have no page number references, which is incredibly tardy. (e.g. 10 fn 8; 119 fn 3) or no footnotes at all (e.g. 120 on the Jewish and Armenian diasporas). There are practically no primary sources used at all; and the book uses Large Numbers to illustrate a number of problems without providing a context in which to situate the numbers. Where there are footnotes, these seem like an arbitrary set of readings that have happened to come the way of the researcher, with a predominance of rather lightweight works from Cambridge University in England. Where would we look, for instance, for a creative engagement with the work of, say James Scott, who appears in the footnotes almost as an afterthought (24, 140), but whose larger arguments on non-state spaces are not discussed? Or Willem van Schendel on borders and borderlands, from which Scott borrows his term for these spaces? The ‘note on further reading’ simply indicates the writer’s own very narrow set of engagements, or at least a book written in a great hurry. A reasonably obvious set of history text-books
(e.g. Bayly's *Birth of the Modern World*) with a sprinkling of journal articles added (e.g. and predictably, Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s ‘connected histories’ essay, and the author seems to have reproduced large chunks of the output of the newly founded *Journals of World History* and *of Global History*), plus a few 1970s studies, to which is added a quick bibliographical trawl of writings in the past ten years, is what one finds there.

It would take a great effort indeed for the book to recover from its muddy beginnings. What follows is a partial salvage operation, which would have been better performed by the no doubt illustrious reviewers of Cambridge University Press, or by the illustrious authors of the blurbs on the back cover.

The book identifies four factors as relating to the increase of movement that was Asia’s ‘mobility revolution’. One, the increased destructiveness of war. Two, uneven development: the expansion of capitalism. Three, the increased reach of states, colonial and postcolonial. Two and three together enable and necessitate large-scale labour movements, and enforce conditions for their control (indentured labour etc.) that have a direct impact on the movement of people. Four, a rise in environmental insecurity. (5-6). A set of questions are raised to go with these factors (9-16): How free or unfree were people moving around? How far did they retain their ‘cultures’? Were these cultures sealed off from other influences, or did they change? (This last one is strangely phrased—if you question the givenness of nation-states, without questioning the givenness of ‘cultures’, or of ‘Asia’, you are being allowed to pick and choose your constructs.) How far did states enable and constrain movements of people(s)? These are relevant questions for a long-term research agenda.

The author draws our attention to the importance of transport and communications improvements that facilitate movement, including the role of changing ideas about social roles and about places of destination or origin. He also writes of factors constraining movement, in particular of passport and visa regimes—which he dates to the decades of the 1950s to the 1970s. This is plain wrong: restrictions on travel based on passports and visas started far earlier, and began to be systematised in the 1920s, particularly in connection with the fears of communism: this applies to all the European empires and therefore also to much of the author’s ‘Asia’, not just to ‘Europe’ (120), as a sojourner in any colonial archive working on conventional political history would have been able to verify, even without the help of published secondary sources.
‘Jewish bankers from Baghdad’ appear (20) as financing the Indian Ocean and South China Sea trade from the second millennium CE; where then are the Baghdadi Jews who were key players in British Empire trade in the 19th and early 20th centuries? Calcutta, Rangoon, Hong Kong, Shanghai as centres of the opium trade, in which Jewish merchants were crucial? Amrith writes of Jewish emigration from India as happening after 1947 (120, 147); this date is far too early, as the larger levels of emigration happened in the 1960s. There is nothing on Indians of Chinese origin after the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict, which is a serious omission. The peak year of Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia was 1927 (38): why? Is this connected at all to the Guomindang-Communist Party split, as any reader of Chinese history might be tempted to infer?

Amrith comments on the nature of available records in the Introduction: statist traces, in archives, usually concerned with movement as a problem; print, the recorded words of the literate; oral histories; and landscape, architecture and material cultures (13-16). These comments seem rather out of place given his own reluctance to use them except second- or third-hand: a migrant speaks for himself for the first time on page 43—but from a ‘tertiary source’, as Ranajit Guha would have put it. Clumsy writing and banalities abound: ‘In this chapter I have shown that . . .’ (55). ‘How did ideas travel across Asia? Historians of imperialism have recently begun to think in terms of the networks . . . . that bound large imperial systems together.’ The ‘nodes’ were ‘port cities and other urban centres of Asia’ (59).

Absences or near-references are equally annoying. There are, for instance, repeated references to the importance of printing presses, without ever getting to describe the question of movable type, often illiterate typesetters and the importance of technological innovation there. What, for instance, made Calcutta the centre of Judaeo-Arabic printing in the latter half of the nineteenth century? The author’s knowledge of Chinese history, and his economic history are both very basic, to the point of appearing to be caricatures.

The book’s strongest hand is on Indian migration, where the author’s comments make some sense. That Indians mostly migrated within the British Empire (Punjabi policemen in Shanghai’s international settlement); that a dominant role was played by British imperial authorities; and that British steamships (in particular the British India Steam Navigation Company) made a good profit out of the movement of Indian passengers (36-37) are points worth re-emphasising—but the treatment is still superficial.
Another noteworthy section is that on Southeast Asian ethno-nationalism and colonialism, the politics of race in the Malayan Emergency and the Malaysian state: too much of the existing literature is from the perspective of colonial policing or balancing the account-books of empire, and subjects such as the forcible resettlement of Chinese in Malaysia (125) are seldom given centre stage. Amrith is able to make reasonably good use of literary vignettes, and also draws upon cinematic representations in a creative manner.

There is probably a section in the book on anything that an informed reader would expect to read about in such a book; which is indeed a strength, as the movement of Chinese and Indian indentured labourers, the Great Leap Forward and the great Indian dams, the movement of populations to Manchuria and pilgrimages to Mecca, South- and Southeast Asian patterns of labour migrations, the Second World War treks of Indians back to India from Southeast Asia, the displacements of the Partition of India, the ‘globalisation’ era movement of labourers to the Gulf countries, can all be accommodated between the covers of a single 200-page book. But the treatment of any of the subjects seldom gets beyond the predictable. It should at least be possible to surprise a non-specialist with material on an area or subject beyond his ken. Amrith magnificently fails to do so.

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Response by Sunil Amrith

I am delighted to have this opportunity to respond to the reviews of Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia by Professors Gavin Jones and Graeme Hugo. First and foremost, I would like to thank them both for their generous and insightful engagement with my work, from which I have learned a lot. The section of the book on the period after 1970 took me furthest from my expertise as a historian, and it is thus particularly fruitful to have the responses to my book of two distinguished scholars of contemporary Asia.

As Professor Jones notes in opening his review, Migration and Diaspora was designed as a concise history of migration in modern Asia, “written for
anyone coming to the subject for the first time, and with students particularly in mind.” The initial idea for the book came directly from a student on my course on Asian Diasporas, which I have taught at Birkbeck since 2006: she felt that she lacked a concise introduction that would allow her to make sense of the subject and to contextualize the disparate case studies I had assigned them to read. Since this coincided with my attempts to situate my own research on the Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia in a regional and comparative context, I took on the challenge of writing one. The book’s brevity was enforced by the publisher, in keeping with the conventions of the series, “New Approaches to Asian History”—as a result, the book is both a synthesis of a broad field of scholarship, and an extended interpretive essay.

The wider context for the book is the recent rise of interest in the history of inter-Asian connections, which has provoked innovative research and is gradually having an impact on teaching. One of my aims in writing Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia was to provide a text that might serve as an accessible framework for understanding some of those connections. Courses in Asian Studies that would once have been organized as a series of national case studies are starting to focus more on the connectedness of Asian societies. Work on cultural and political flows within Asia has taken its place alongside the long-standing interest in encounters between Asia and “the West.” The rapidity with which patterns of migration and exchange have altered Asia’s economic and cultural geography has provoked an outpouring of scholarship across many of the social sciences. Since the turn of the millennium, a good part of this research has been done in Asia, a lot of it at the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute, where Professor Jones is based. And since 2008, the American Social Science Research Council and partners have convened a series of “Inter-Asia” conferences; their workshops have set the agenda for much exciting scholarship: the geography of Asian studies as a field is shifting.

At the same time, the rapid intensification of inter-Asian connections in the present day—migration, trade, diplomatic relations, the movement of digital images—has raised new questions for historians about the past, opening up many of the taken-for-granted geographical boundaries of the area studies tradition. A reinvigoration of oceanic history has reshaped our sense of geography: showing that often water connects where land divides, and that littoral societies might have denser relations with one another than...
with their hinterlands (Bose 2006). Intellectual history is another means of studying Asia across borders. In recent years, many scholars have revisited the idea of “Asia,” with a particular focus on debates between Asian intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Kakuzo, and Sun Yat-sen, and the shifting balance between nationalism, internationalism, and civilizational thought that informed their geographical conceptions (Duara 2010).

The history of borders and borderlands has produced a rich vein of scholarship on how the boundaries of modern states have divided and reconfigured older cultural regions; and on how cross-border flows nevertheless remain vital, difficult to control, and politically productive (Van Schendel 2005; Tagliacozzo 2005). The history of migration—more aggregative, and in some ways more abstract—combines the approaches above with an older, still vital, field of scholarship on urbanization and social change, and also with the tradition of labour history, including the history of agrarian labour and rural-rural migration (Breman 1990).

Where older studies of migration tended to make firm distinctions between internal and international migration—most works were interested only in one or the other—these new inter-Asian perspectives bring about a change in vision: one that might help us to think of mobility in broader terms. By the same token, focusing on mobility in general (including, centrally, the mobility of labour) might mitigate an over-emphasis in recent scholarship on transnational connections for their own sake, while also working against the marked tendency of recent historical scholarship to focus exclusively on the writings of Asia’s intellectual elites. The history of migration makes quite clear that nation-states and national borders have been strengthened as often as they have been undermined by globalization.

While the importance of migration in contemporary Asia is widely recognized, its importance in modern Asian history has been underplayed. The assumptions of colonial historiography cast a long shadow: the idea of a static and immobile Asia, juxtaposed against a dynamic Europe, has had a long life. The predominance of national histories—underpinned by the assumption that the nation-state was by default the appropriate scale of historical and political analysis—led to a neglect of cross-border mobility, even where long-distance diasporas were key players in the spread of nationalism. This historiographical blind spot was also circumstantial: the growth in area studies departments in the U.S., the U.K., and Europe,
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coincided with the low ebb of cross-border migration in Asia, and in many other parts of the world. Yet states’ projections of a world of closed borders rarely matched the messier reality of frontiers. Engseng Ho (2012) has identified a deeper set of scholarly assumptions that inhibits our ability to recognise the importance of mobility:

It is not simply that the nation-state somehow put blinders on us, and that we somehow then took off the blinders, when something called globalization came along… the problem goes deeper than that. The problem is that to varying degrees of self-consciousness, we work in an enlightenment tradition of western social theory that has been obsessed with an internalist and constitutionalist view of what society is. That tradition early on sought to avoid or expunge the external from theory, in order to create a society for a state, and vice versa.

Migration and Diaspora sought a shift in perspective by putting mobility at the heart of the story: seeing migration—temporary and permanent, free and forced, internal and international—as a vital social process at the heart of many of the shifts of modern Asian history, not the least of which was a fundamental redistribution of population. While it has been a dynamic feature of Asian societies from the earliest times, mobility underwent a substantial, transformative change in scale in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it is on the period after 1850 that the book focuses most of its attention.

However I argue throughout the book that mobility and immobility are in intimate embrace: the unloosening of peasant labour for long-distance journeys took place along side the mass immobilization of nomadic people, the settlement of artisanal groups on marginal lands, and the proscription of illicit movement in South Asia and beyond. Asia’s mobility revolution depended on deepening immobility—including the immobility of “coolies” on the plantations. Similarly, in an age of globalization, voluntary migration across borders takes place alongside trafficking; and for all the border crossings that do take place, borders are often places where people get stuck, not least in detention camps and other penal institutions.

At one level, Migration and Diaspora is a contribution to global migration history—Adam McKeown was a pioneer in showing the large (until then overlooked) contribution that Asian circuits of mobility made to flows of global migration, and he and others have subsequently developed this work on a global, comparative scale (McKeown 2004; Lucassen, Lucassen
and Manning 2010). Nevertheless I chose to limit Migration and Diaspora to a consideration of inter-Asian migration (broadly defined) for a few reasons: one is simply that migration from Asia to the west has received far more scholarly attention, and we are better served with good work on this than we are on inter-Asian migration. My choice also relates to a broader argument that the book makes: inter-Asian patterns of migration have some distinctive characteristics. These include the prevalence of sojourning (until the mid-twentieth century), and the layering of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial routes. The distinctiveness of the social and cultural encounters that arose from encounters between Asians is poorly captured by the theoretical literature on postcolonialism; similarly, the particular difficulties faced by Asian minorities in post-colonial Asian states bears little resemblance to the models put forward in diaspora studies, which originated in the study of immigrant minorities (including Asian minorities) in the multicultural democracies of the West. I hope it is clear that I do not see inter-Asian migration as discrete or easily separable from wider patterns of movement. Professor Hugo is right to point out that the story of Asian migration to OECD countries in the post-colonial era (and indeed Asian migration to Europe in the early twentieth century) is equally worthy of attention.

Professor Jones and Professor Hugo point out a number of areas which they would have liked to have seen covered more fully in the book—the changing demographic structure of Indian and Chinese communities in Southeast Asia; the international dimension of the presence of Indian and Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia; the question of migrant remittances; the importance of undocumented migration in Asia; the link between poverty, migration, and development. I can only agree that these are crucial issues. More broadly, both reviewers detect an underlying imbalance in the book between the historical material and the material on contemporary migration in Asia: the gaps they identify in coverage lie primarily in the recent period. Partly this might simply reflect the limitations of my vantage point as a historian. But it also reflects—in inverse proportion—an informational imbalance: the relative paucity of scholarship and source material on Asian migration in the past stands in sharp contrast to the profusion of information on contemporary migration in Asia. Many of the issues Professor Hugo raises as essential to understanding contemporary Asian migration would certainly benefit from more attention from historians.
The question of migrant remittances is one example: much work remains to be done on how they functioned in the early-twentieth century, though scholars of the Overseas Chinese have uncovered plenty of rich material.

Another promising avenue of enquiry lies in the history of the information itself. Professor Jones is right to suggest that the particular statistical claims I cite in the book are approximations at best. But this raises an interesting set of questions. The history of migration statistics in Asia—how they were collected, who collected them, and for what purposes—has hardly been researched; a better understanding of their origins, going back to the International Labour Organization’s early interest in the subject in the 1920s, might help us to contextualize the proliferation of statistics that we deal with today, particularly since many of the categories we continue to use have their origins in earlier moments of statistical expansion.

Bringing together historical scholarship on Asian migration with the rapidly-evolving study of contemporary migration poses its challenges—not least the historian’s temptation to over-emphasize long-term continuities. But I believe it is a project worth persevering with. Professor Jones’s and Professor Hugo’s thoughtful responses to my book reinforce my conviction that there would be much to be gained from developing a research agenda on migration that brings together historians and scholars of contemporary Asia. One launching pad for such collaboration was suggested by Prasenjit Duara in his own review of Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia: ‘I hope Amrith can produce a CD or other software of these population dynamics over space and time. The visualization of this kind of data will be sure to launch this project into new directions’ (Duara 2012:501). New mapping and visualization software could well provide a starting point for a more concerted attempt to understand the dynamics of Asian migration both in the past and in the present. I have begun thinking about the possibilities this might offer and they appear limitless: dauntingly so. Perhaps it is a project that would be best achieved through collaboration, going beyond what a single scholar could achieve.

Professor Benjamin Zachariah does not appear to think much of my book. I leave to readers’ judgement the question of my prose style, which Professor Zachariah dislikes. By the same token, I fail to see the relevance of his fixation on Cambridge University, which he mentions repeatedly. This leaves me to address the more substantive criticisms Professor Zachariah makes.
His pointed questions—why migration? Why Asia?—are entirely legitimate; I hope a provisional answer has emerged from the discussion above, not least from Professor Jones’s and Professor Hugo’s thoughtful comments on my book, and their wider reflections on contemporary Asian migration.

The second point concerns the number of references to be provided in a survey history of this kind. Professor Zachariah might feel that I got the balance wrong, but this was a matter of choice, not the “shoddy execution” he accuses me of. My decisions on what to reference were shaped by the conventions of the series in which the book was published, and by the example of other works in a similar genre that I have found useful in my own teaching and research. My approach was to provide footnotes to specific sources of information and for each major case study, but not to every passing example. Incidentally, I agree that the history of the Jewish and Armenian diasporas in Asia would merit more research; fortunately we now have Sebouh Aslanian’s superb study on the Armenian diaspora to inspire further investigation (Aslanian 2011).

I was puzzled to be taken to task for not using more primary sources: the book was quite explicitly a work of synthesis and interpretation. But I could not have written it without an extensive basis of primary research: specifically, archival and ethnographic research on Tamil migration to Southeast Asia that I have conducted over nearly a decade. The detailed results of that work have appeared elsewhere: in journal articles that were in print at the time Migration and Diaspora was published, and in a book that will be published in October 2013 (Amrith 2009, 2010, 2013). It is surely not unusual to communicate the results of a long-term research project in a variety of styles, from scholarly articles addressed to other specialists, at one end of the spectrum, to a work of broad synthesis, at the other. Filling Migration and Diaspora with references to my own archival research would have defeated its purpose.

Professor Zachariah finds my Guide to Further Reading arbitrary, but sadly he fails to make any constructive suggestions, opting instead for fanciful speculation about my intellectual formation. In compiling that select bibliography, I decided to focus on works that would be easily accessible to students, using my own students’ experience as a starting point: accessibility, here, meant a combination of clarity and comprehensiveness of content, and ease of availability in libraries or on-line. At the time I wrote the book, debates on “open access” were less developed than they are today.
The question of accessibility in an age of electronic journals with expensive subscriptions—reflected in the challenges faced by libraries in public institutions facing budget cuts the world over, including my own in London—is more complex than ever. Any future iteration of this book (or others like it) would need to engage more fully with the possibilities and challenges of digital publishing. The greater limitation of my book’s bibliographical essay is one Professor Zachariah does not mention: it lists only English-language works. The absence of Chinese- and Japanese-language references is the biggest gap; beyond that, for better or worse, a significant proportion of social scientific and policy research on migration published in other parts of Asia, is published in English. However, most of the works listed do contain plentiful references to materials in a range of Asian languages for readers who wish to pursue particular topics further.

Finally, a point of detail: according to Professor Zachariah’s account, my book locates restrictions on Asian migration in the period from 1950 to 1970; and this, he argues, is “plain wrong.” Unfortunately he misconstrues my argument. The book suggests many sources for migration control in Asia in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including but not limited to colonial concerns about political subversion. Control over the Hajj in the nineteenth century, Chapter 2 suggests, was among the first and most widespread forms of control over mobility. I show that immigration and emigration controls proliferated in the 1930s, in response to the depression, and as a result of nationalist concerns about migration both in Southeast Asia and in India. Yet such controls only became universal in Asia during the 1950s: what was at stake was precisely the shift from concern over specific individuals and political groups (among them, the anarchists Professor Zachariah mentions) to a desire to control all labour migration, linked to a wider concern with sovereign control over borders and a particular concern with “minority” populations. Passport controls in South and Southeast Asia were not primarily targeted at the mass of working-class migrants in the early twentieth century (in contrast with North America, where racially-based immigration restriction was already well established); by the second half of the twentieth century, it was labour mobility above all that the new regime of documentation sought to regulate.

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