Asian labour migrations to Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries correlated with the growth of world trade, European territorial expansion in Asia, and the development of global commercial and trading networks. Imperial managerial structures also enmeshed colonial territories within Empire and facilitated an empire-wide sourcing of labour. Faster and more efficient shipping and colonial trade policies further enhanced trans-regional connections and generated migration. The labour migrations comprised mostly Chinese and Indian male migrants who were recruited for mining and plantation enterprises and public works construction in the colonies. Few Asian women migrated of their own accord, although sugar planters in Malaya hired a number of Indian women in the late nineteenth century. Indian women’s participation in the Malayan economy increased after the development of the rubber industry, largely due to the gendering of tasks on rubber plantations, the need for a settled proletariat and the activities of Indian nationalists. The Second World War and decolonization processes in Southeast Asia and the emergence of independent nation states afterward foreshadowed the ending of open immigration policies.

In the 1950s, the United States emerged as the dominant economic power in a second wave of globalization, which was characterized by further integration of economic activities and labour markets. Then, as international migration expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, there was renewed interest in the economics of labour migration and the benefits of transnational labour movements. This also led to a shift from political rhetoric to political reality in considering international labour migration (ILM) as an integral component of broader socio-economic transformative processes. The new geography of migration in Southeast Asia is consistent with the rise of newly-industrializing economies, trade liberalization and the regulation of labour markets. In countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, governments have promoted economic growth through neoliberal policies, including trade, financial and investment liberalization.
All three have again become labour-destination states and rely on migrant workers for labour force growth. They have also appropriated segments of the working class from poorer countries in the region. They regulate migration through elaborate administrative frameworks and border controls while private labour brokers carry out recruitment and placement of migrant labour.

Shifting labour market trends in the region have coincided with changing organization of labour processes and the gendering of labour migration. Male migrants are predominantly recruited for manufacturing, construction, plantation and agricultural work (especially in Malaysia and Thailand), while female migrants are recruited mainly for care-giving and domestic work. Large numbers of women in the three countries have also been absorbed into the public sector, clerical, teaching, and other related occupations. In the absence of affordable state-funded childcare and other services, governments have facilitated the recruitment of foreign domestic workers and caregivers mainly through labour accords to lighten local women’s “double” burden. Domestic workers form the most marginalized group of migrant workers since they are not regarded as formal sector workers and their employers regulate their working conditions.

The transformed migration patterns in the region therefore underscore issues of the gender division of labour within households and the labour market and racialized hierarchies of foreign workers.

This chapter on Proletarian and Gendered Labour Migrations in Southeast Asia investigates the complex exchanges and interconnections between colonizers and colonies and later independent nation states, and the construction of migration pathways in Asia. The development of International Labour Migration is discussed in two sections. The first section traces the incorporation of Southeast Asian states into the world trading system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the organization of proletarian migration regimes for colonial economies. During this period European colonizers instigated and organized labour migration, principally from India and China, for the production of tropical commodities against the backdrop of industrial capitalism, European industrialization and regional specialization. The second section explores the role of Southeast Asian governments (especially Malaysia and Singapore) in establishing immigration regimes to recruit foreign labour after the 1970s. The creation of new migration systems and migration corridors provides a framework for understanding global-Asian connections in the context of globalized productive sectors and the new gender order. Finally,