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