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Diasporas and Migrations

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Introduction

Diasporas and Migrations: Asian Communities Abroad, Labor, and Transnational Networks examines how people from Asia have moved, settled, and stayed connected across borders from the early modern era to the present. The histories traced here span coerced and contracted labor schemes, commercial and religious voyages, wartime displacements, and the contemporary movements of students and professionals. Rather than a single arc from “tradition” to “modernity,” these trajectories reveal layered, recurring patterns in which migration is as much about sustaining ties and obligations as it is about departure and arrival.

The book is anchored in case studies of Chinese, Indian, Korean, and diverse Southeast Asian communities. These cases were chosen not only for their scale and visibility, but because they illuminate different infrastructures of mobility: shipping routes and merchant guilds, indenture and plantation economies, military occupations and refugee corridors, and, today, global education and technology sectors. Across these settings, migrants negotiated legal categories, racial hierarchies, and labor regimes while building institutions—temples, associations, remittance channels, language schools—that reproduced community life abroad.

A central theme is the persistence and transformation of ties to the homeland. Remittances have long knit families and regions into far-flung circuits of support, funding household survival, small enterprises, and village institutions. Yet money is only one strand. Political loyalties and activism have flowed along these same channels, from anti-colonial fundraising and exile journalism to contemporary lobbying and long-distance nationalism. Cultural exchange—foodways, festivals, media, and religious practice—likewise operates transnationally, reshaping both host societies and places of origin.

Labor remains the structuring force of many Asian migrations. From nineteenth-century indenture and “coolie” contracts to the twentieth-century expansion of contract labor under the Gulf’s kafala system and the global demand for care workers, mobility has been organized around work, often under unequal terms. At the same time, the rise of student and professional migration since the late twentieth century has produced new forms of circulation—shorter stays, dual careers, and trans-Pacific or trans-Asian networks that link research labs, firms, and start-ups. These high-skill pathways coexist with and sometimes depend upon the undervalued labor of service, logistics, and domestic work that sustains global cities.

Attention to gender, generation, and status runs throughout. Women’s migration—especially in domestic and care sectors—reconfigures family dynamics and

remittance strategies, while left-behind spouses, grandparents, and children navigate new arrangements of care. Young people growing up in diaspora confront questions of language, identity, and belonging, often becoming translators between home and host contexts. Legal status—citizenship, permanent residency, temporary visas, or irregular presence—shapes vulnerability and opportunity, affecting access to education, health care, and political voice.

Methodologically, this book weaves archival records with oral histories, ethnography, and quantitative analysis. It draws on shipping logs and plantation archives, community newspapers and temple ledgers, migrant letters and digital traces, census tables and remittance data. This mixed approach allows us to capture both the structural forces—empires, markets, laws—and the intimate practices—kinship, faith, obligation—through which migrants make lives across borders.

The chapters proceed roughly chronologically before turning to cross-cutting themes. Early chapters map maritime routes and imperial labor regimes; middle chapters analyze major diasporas—Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Southeast Asian—with attention to region-specific histories; later chapters examine remittances, politics, religion, gender, law, activism, and media, and then assess contemporary transformations in digital connectivity, climate disruptions, and new geographies of work. The concluding chapter returns to enduring questions of home and membership, arguing that diaspora is not a residual condition but a constitutive feature of our world.

By tracing centuries of movement alongside the institutions and networks that sustain it, *Diasporas and Migrations* invites readers to see Asian mobility as a dynamic field of relationships that binds origin and host societies. In doing so, it challenges narrow debates about assimilation or return and instead foregrounds the everyday practices—economic, political, and cultural—through which migrants make and remake belonging.

CHAPTER ONE: Frameworks and Sources for the Study of Asian Diasporas

To speak of Asian diasporas is to begin with movement, but also with the documents and stories that let us trace it. How do we map a journey that might begin in a village, pause in a port, and end in a plantation or a suburb? Where do we find the voices of people who often traveled without papers, or whose papers were written by others—ship captains, recruiters, clerks, and officials? A study of mobility must be practical. It means assembling scattered traces, weighing them against each other, and building a picture that is as close to lived experience as the archive will allow. This chapter lays out the tools for that work: the ideas that help us think across time and space, and the sources that carry the echoes of migration.

The concept of diaspora itself is a good place to start, not because it is neat but because its edges are revealing. Originally used to describe the scattering of the Jews from ancient homelands, the term now covers many groups bound by memory, movement, and connection across borders. For Asian migrations, “diaspora” often captures the sense of being abroad while still tied to home—economically, politically, and culturally. It is not the same as exile, which prescribes a longing to return, nor is it identical to diaspora as a purely cultural identity. In the historical record, we see groups called “migrants,” “sojourners,” “exiles,” and “diasporas,” sometimes by authorities and sometimes by themselves. These labels carry stakes.

One practical distinction is between “diaspora” as a descriptive category and “transnationalism” as a set of processes. Transnationalism points to the sustained practices that cross borders: remittances sent through informal channels, religious pilgrimages organized in villages, political campaigns funded from abroad, or media consumed on smartphones in real time. Asian migrations provide striking examples of each. Transnational networks do not erase local belonging; they entwine with it, producing hybrid forms of life that are neither fully “here” nor “there.” That entanglement is central to the story of Asian communities abroad and to the way we can study them.

We also need categories that make sense of labor, since work structures so much movement. The book foregrounds labor regimes—coercive and free, contractual and informal—as contexts for migration. In the nineteenth century, indenture and “coolie” systems tied Asian bodies to plantations and mines. In the twentieth century, contract labor in the Gulf and care chains across Asia and beyond created new circuits. In the twenty-first, student visas and professional mobility shape an elite layer of circulation, often underpinned by less visible service and domestic work. These regimes matter

because they define rights, risks, and the routes that migrants can take.

Another organizing idea is that of networks—material infrastructures and social ties that move people, money, and information. Shipping lines and railroads, temple associations and clan guilds, remittance houses and hawala brokers, WhatsApp groups and YouTube channels: these are not just background noise. They are the arteries of migration, shaping who can move, how fast, and with what support. To study Asian diasporas is to map these networks, to see how they emerge, mature, and sometimes break, and to note how communities rebuild them in new conditions.

Sources for this work are varied, and they never tell the full story on their own. Official records—passenger lists, immigration files, colonial labor reports—give structure to our narratives but often reflect the biases of the state. They record names with spellings that distort, occupations that simplify, and origins that ignore local nuance. Plantation logs track outputs and infractions but rarely emotions or family strategies. Consular reports detail who crossed borders legally, while ignoring the many who moved through other means. Reading these documents requires skepticism and imagination, asking not only what they say but what they leave out.

Community archives offer a different lens. Clan and dialect association records, temple ledgers, cemetery inscriptions, and local newspapers tell of networks that were not always legible to the state. They name patrons and detail mutual aid funds, record donations for building a school, and publish letters from far-off places. These sources show how migrants organized to support each other, often long before formal welfare systems existed. They reveal an institutional life that was robust and locally grounded, even as it spanned continents. Much of this material sits in community centers and private homes, waiting to be cataloged and read.

Personal documents—letters, diaries, travel passes, contracts—bring us closer to individual experience. Migrant letters are precious but fragmentary, often written under pressure and constrained by postal systems that might censor or delay them. They are intimate and transactional at once: requests for money, reports on health, descriptions of work, news of births and deaths. Sometimes they include coded phrases that convey more than is written. A single letter might move across several hands and borders, carrying remittances along with news. Reading these carefully allows historians to reconstruct households and their strategies.

Oral histories and ethnography add texture and voice, filling gaps left by paper. Migrants and their descendants remember journeys differently from how officials recorded them. Recollections of the smell of a ship's hold, the sound of a market in a new city, the shock of a wage cut, or the relief of a loan from a friend convey dimensions that numbers and forms cannot. Interviews allow us to understand how people make sense of their mobility, how they negotiate identities, and how they adapt institutions—temples, churches, businesses—to new contexts. Oral history is not

a perfect mirror of the past; memory reshapes events, but with careful comparison, it illuminates motivations and meanings.

Quantitative sources complement these narratives. Shipping manifests and census tables help us count passengers and trace routes. Wage records and remittance data allow estimates of money flows and their effects on households and regions. Today, big data from mobile apps, money transfer operators, and social media platforms offer granular views of movement and communication in near real time. These numbers have power: they can show patterns across decades or continents. They also have limits: they may miss informal flows, aggregate diverse experiences into categories, or obscure the people who fall outside the counted populations.

Language matters in both sources and analysis. Many official documents were written in the languages of empires—English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese—while migrants spoke and wrote in many others: Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, and more. Translating these terms is not a neutral act; it involves choices that reflect local contexts and power. Names change across scripts and borders, and concepts like “home,” “caste,” “clan,” or “nation” do not always map neatly onto each other. Sensitivity to language helps us see how migrants understood themselves and were understood by others.

Thinking about historical periods is equally important. The early modern era saw maritime trade and religious mobility across the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. The nineteenth century brought imperial expansion, indenture, and the mass movement of labor. The twentieth century added colonial wars, occupations, refugee crises, and the rise of nation-states with strict borders. Late twentieth and twenty-first century developments include globalization, professional mobility, digital networks, and climate-related displacement. These phases are not cleanly separated; they overlap, and institutions built in one era often persist into the next. Recognizing this continuity helps us avoid false breaks.

To make sense of Asian migrations, we need comparative frames, not just regional ones. Chinese and Indian migrations, often discussed separately, share features such as long-distance trade, clan organization, and remittance economies. Korean mobility, shaped by empire and war, highlights different pathways of forced and voluntary movement. Southeast Asian cases—Filipino, Vietnamese, Hmong, and others—show how care chains, refugee flows, and labor export policies produce distinct transnational formations. Comparing these groups reveals common constraints and creative adaptations without flattening differences or forcing parallels.

One recurring issue is the boundary between voluntary and coerced movement. Many migrations that appear “free” on paper were shaped by poverty, debt, or war. Contracts could be tools of opportunity or instruments of control, depending on

context and bargaining power. Even in cases of indenture, where work was bound by time and debt, migrants made choices—however constrained—about family, strategy, and survival. The challenge for researchers is to avoid romanticizing agency while acknowledging the power of structures. Sources help us track this balance, especially when they record complaints, petitions, and strikes.

The legal status of migrants is another cross-cutting theme. Papers define rights: who can work, where they can live, whether they can bring family, and what happens if they fall afoul of authorities. Across the history of Asian migrations, we see regimes of temporary labor, conditional residency, and precarious citizenship. These categories shape daily life and long-term prospects, and they leave traces in files and forms. Understanding them requires reading law alongside lived experience, and paying attention to how people navigate rules—sometimes complying, sometimes evading, sometimes changing the rules themselves.

We also need to consider the lives left behind. Migration is often a family project, not an individual escape. Households send members abroad to diversify risk and maximize income, keeping a foot in multiple places. Parents, spouses, and children manage separation, redistribute care, and renegotiate roles. Some families split tasks across borders, with one parent working abroad and another managing home and children. Others rely on grandparents or siblings. These arrangements shape who moves, when, and under what conditions. Sources like household surveys, letters, and oral histories help us reconstruct these networks and their costs.

Receiving societies are part of the story, too. Migrants arrive in places with their own labor needs, racial hierarchies, and political dynamics. Ports like Singapore, Hong Kong, and San Francisco; plantations in the Caribbean, Fiji, and Hawaii; factories in the United States, Japan, and Germany; households in the Gulf, Singapore, and Hong Kong—each context created distinct openings and constraints. Laws, unions, and community responses shaped the possibilities for settlement and belonging. The same migrant might be seen as a desirable worker in one moment and a threat in the next. Mapping these shifts is crucial.

There is also a material ecology to migration that we can trace. Ships, railways, and airplanes move bodies; letters, telegrams, and phones move information; remittances move value. Each technology has its own rhythm and reach. Early migrants relied on steamships and postal orders; later ones on telegraphs and cable transfers; now they use mobile wallets and instant messaging. These infrastructures change the speed and cost of staying in touch, and they alter the calculations people make about leaving, staying, and returning. Recognizing these material conditions keeps our analysis grounded.

Methodologically, we benefit from triangulation. Combining sources—maritime logs with family letters, plantation records with oral histories, census data with temple

ledgers—allows us to check and supplement one source against another. This approach helps address silences and biases. For instance, if official records undercount women migrants, community sources might reveal networks that supported them. If contracts say wages were paid, letters and petitions might show deductions and delays. Triangulation is not just a technical step; it is a way of staying humble about what we can know.

Humility extends to the very definition of “Asia” as a category. The term is geopolitical as much as cultural, and it includes enormous diversity. The migrations we consider cross the Himalayas, the seas, and the deserts; they link subregions and connect to other continents. Some migrants identified with their village or dialect group before they identified with a larger “Asia.” Many were subjects of empires before they were citizens of nations. Keeping these complexities in view prevents us from treating Asia as a monolith and helps us see the particularities that matter on the ground.

Historiography—how scholars have written about these migrations—also shapes our tools. Early work often focused on national stories or colonial development, celebrating “pioneer” settlers or lamenting “coolie” exploitation. Later scholarship brought in subaltern perspectives, gender analysis, and transnational approaches. Recent digital humanities projects map routes and visualize remittance flows, while community historians compile local archives. We can build on these advances by staying attentive to lived experience, asking practical questions, and avoiding grand narratives that smooth out contradictions.

Archival ethics are part of the toolkit, too. Many records contain sensitive information—names, family histories, legal statuses—whose publication can affect people today. Working with communities to decide what to share, how to anonymize, and where to return materials is essential. It is also important to recognize that some histories have been deliberately erased or suppressed, especially those involving violence, exploitation, or resistance. Recovering these stories requires patience and care, and sometimes the willingness to let silence remain where sources cannot speak.

The global context of Asian migrations includes political economy. The rise and fall of commodity booms—opium, sugar, tin, rubber, electronics—pull labor in and push it out. Industrialization in Japan, Korea, and later China drew rural workers to cities and overseas. The demand for care in aging societies created new opportunities for women migrants from Southeast Asia and South Asia. Today’s logistics hubs—from ports to warehouses—rely on Asian labor, often invisibly. Understanding these macro forces keeps us from treating migration as merely a personal choice. It places decisions within structures that constrain and enable.

Migrants also innovate, creating institutions that outlast their founders. Rotating credit associations helped pool capital for new ventures. Clan associations built schools and

cemeteries. Faith-based networks organized pilgrimages and charity. Today, diaspora-led start-ups and advocacy groups push for rights and recognition. These institutions are not always formal, but they are durable. Their records—meeting minutes, financial books, newsletters—are rich sources for tracing social life and political voice. They show that diaspora is not only about movement but about building something together, even at a distance.

Studying these communities also requires attention to generational change. First-generation migrants often emphasize the imperative to work and send remittances. Their children navigate school systems, labor markets, and identities in new societies. Grandparents may keep alive memories of origin while grandchildren adopt new customs and languages. Intergenerational differences show up in archives—letters from parents urging children to study, school reports, legal cases over inheritance, and debates over marriage. Tracking these shifts helps us see how diaspora persists and transforms.

We must also consider harm and risk. Migrations have been entangled with smuggling, trafficking, and exploitation. Borders create incentives for irregular movement, and enforcement regimes produce vulnerability. These realities leave traces—arrest records, deportation orders, and accounts of dangerous journeys—but also gaps, as fear and illegality limit documentation. Any honest account of Asian diasporas acknowledges these darker sides without sensationalizing them. It also recognizes the resilience and solidarity that people build under conditions of risk, including mutual aid and advocacy.

Digital tools now add new layers to both migration and research. Platforms connect migrants to jobs, families, and communities; they also generate data that scholars can analyze. This brings opportunities and dilemmas: how to protect privacy, how to interpret large datasets, and how to avoid conflating online presence with social reality. Digital diasporas are part of the story, but they do not replace the physical infrastructures of movement and exchange. They augment them, sometimes creating novel forms of connection and sometimes reinforcing old inequalities.

In short, studying Asian diasporas requires an adaptable toolkit. We combine ideas—diaspora, transnationalism, labor regimes, networks—with methods that range from close reading of letters to mapping data flows. We weigh sources critically, triangulate where possible, and remain open to the surprises that archives and interviews deliver. The chapters that follow put these tools to work across specific cases and themes, tracing the routes and relationships that have shaped Asian communities abroad. The aim is not to settle the story but to follow its threads wherever they lead.

This approach is pragmatic and, we hope, engaging. It treats the past as a set of practical problems—how to cross an ocean, how to send money, how to keep a family

together—and shows how people solved them, sometimes with ingenuity and sometimes with help. It also keeps a straight eye on power: the laws that gatekeep, the markets that pull and push, the social hierarchies that mark difference. With these frameworks and sources, we can move confidently into the histories that follow, from maritime worlds to plantations, from gold fields to Gulf households, and from letters to digital messages.

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