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The Asian Diaspora

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Introduction

This book follows the movements of Asian peoples and the worlds they built across the Indian Ocean, Pacific, and Atlantic from 1800 to the present. It is a social and economic history of migration, remittances, and transnational networks that braids together plantations and port cities, labor contracts and family strategies, merchant circuits and political alliances. By tracing the routes of sailors, indentured laborers, artisans, traders, students, nurses, and entrepreneurs, we see how mobility reordered everyday life at home and abroad and how diasporic connections reshaped both sending and receiving societies.

The nineteenth century inaugurated an age of movement on an unprecedented scale. As empires expanded and commodity frontiers widened, new labor regimes emerged: the coolie trades that ferried South and Southeast Asians to sugar plantations in Mauritius, the Caribbean, and the Pacific; the recruitment of Chinese and Japanese workers to mines, railways, and farms in the Americas; and the steady circulation of merchants, moneylenders, and shopkeepers who knitted together coastal markets from Zanzibar to Singapore. These flows were not simply responses to imperial demand. They relied on preexisting networks of kinship and credit, on religious institutions and guilds, and on navigational knowledge honed over centuries in the monsoon and Pacific worlds.

Migration generated economies of return. Remittances—cash, goods, and gifts—traveled along with letters, newspapers, and news of opportunity. They provisioned villages, financed marriages and education, and underwrote land purchases and small businesses. Informal financial instruments such as hundi, hui, and rotating savings associations allowed migrants to move value at low cost, while formal infrastructures—from steamship companies and telegraph lines to banks and later fintech platforms—scaled these circuits across oceans. The story of the Asian diaspora is therefore also a story of how people converted mobility into assets, turning wages into futures and distance into obligation and leverage.

Diasporas were never purely economic. They were regulated, racialized, and politicized. States and empires sought to count, classify, and control mobile populations through passports, surveillance, contract laws, and immigration exclusions. Migrants encountered segregation and violence as well as alliances and solidarities with other working peoples. Abroad, they built associations, schools, temples, mosques, and churches that sustained community and transmitted language and culture. They also organized: raising funds for reform and revolution, lobbying for home rule or independence, and later engaging with postcolonial states over development, citizenship, and rights. Diasporic politics—both conciliatory and

confrontational—proved central to shaping modern Asia and its global entanglements.

The temporal arc of this book crosses rupture and continuity: the shocks of war and depression; the redrawing of borders and the birth of new states; the oil boom and the globalization of service work; financial crises and public health emergencies; and the accelerating pressures of climate change. Each moment reconfigured routes and rules of mobility, yet the logics of family strategy, mutual aid, and networked trust persisted. By following households as decision-making units and ports and corridors as nodal spaces, we illuminate how large structures—capital, empire, and the nation-state—are realized in intimate practices of care, calculation, and belonging.

Methodologically, the chapters combine archival records, shipping manifests, contract registers, court cases, missionary and consular reports, newspapers, oral histories, and quantitative series on wages, prices, and remittances. Network analysis helps map the webs linking villages to global cities; ethnography and family histories reveal how obligations are negotiated across generations; and comparative case studies situate South, East, and Southeast Asian migrations within Indian Ocean, Pacific, and Atlantic frames. Throughout, the unit of analysis shifts in scale—from a remittance letter to a commodity chain, from a household ledger to a migration regime—to capture the multi-sited nature of diasporic life.

While the book highlights common patterns, it also attends to difference. Gender and generation mattered for who moved and who stayed, who saved and who spent, who cared for children and elders, and who could claim rights and recognition. Race and class shaped exposure to risk and access to mobility, as did legal status—contract laborer, merchant, student, refugee, or professional. Religion and language anchored communities but also opened routes, whether through temple patronage, Sufi lineages, church networks, or new media publics. The diaspora was not a single community but a shifting constellation of communities whose boundaries were constantly made and remade.

Finally, this history speaks to the present. Contemporary Asian migration—whether domestic work and construction in the Gulf, care work in global cities, or entrepreneurial and professional mobility across the Pacific Rim—rests on older infrastructures and imaginaries even as digital platforms, biometric borders, and climate volatility transform the terrain. Understanding the *longue durée* of migration, remittances, and transnational networks helps us see not only how the diaspora came to be, but how it continues to shape economies, politics, and cultures across oceans. The chapters that follow chart these processes in turn, moving from routes to regimes, from households to world regions, and from the nineteenth century to futures already in motion.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Asian Diaspora, 1800-Present

To understand the Asian diaspora, one must first trace its map. This is not a single line drawn on paper, but a web woven across oceans, stitched by labor contracts, merchant ledgers, and family letters. From 1800 onward, the Indian Ocean, Pacific, and Atlantic worlds became corridors rather than barriers for Asian migrants. Sailors left ports in Canton and Calcutta for Liverpool and Lima; indentured laborers boarded ships in Madras for Mauritius and the Caribbean; traders from Gujarat and Hadhramaut opened shops from Zanzibar to Singapore. The map of the diaspora is thus a moving grid of routes, nodes, and circuits that connected rural villages to global cities and remittance economies to imperial policy.

The nineteenth century set the stage for mass mobility. Industrialization and the expansion of commodity frontiers—sugar, tea, rubber, opium, and later gold—created insatiable demand for labor. Steamships and the Suez Canal shortened travel times and lowered costs, making long-distance migration more feasible for laborers and merchants alike. Telegraph cables linked distant ports, allowing news of wages and conditions to travel faster than ships. These technological shifts did not create migration out of thin air, but they amplified preexisting networks of kinship, trade, and religion that had long navigated monsoon seasons and maritime routes across the Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

Two broad migration systems dominated the century. The first was the coolie trade, a labor regime that moved millions of South and Southeast Asians to plantation economies in the Indian Ocean and Atlantic. The second involved the recruitment of Chinese and Japanese workers to mines, railways, and farms in the Americas, often under contracts that varied from nominally free wage labor to coercive bonded arrangements. While these systems are often studied separately, they shared features: brokers and middlemen, maritime infrastructures, and the logic of sending remittances home. They also shared contradictions, as migration promised opportunity while exposing migrants to racialization, disease, and legal vulnerability.

Ports were the gates of the diaspora. Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Yokohama, and Manila became nodal points where laborers, merchants, and officials negotiated passage, contracts, and health inspections. In these port cities, steamship agents, labor recruiters, and pawnbrokers created a marketplace of mobility. Shipping manifests recorded names, ages, occupations, and places of origin, offering later historians a glimpse into who moved and when. Urban infrastructures—quarantine stations, warehouses, banking houses, and

chophouses—served the migrant traffic, while dockworkers and harbor pilots formed a cosmopolitan labor force familiar with ships from many nations.

Maps help us see scale and direction. The coolie trade sent South Asians to Mauritius, Réunion, Natal, Fiji, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica, as well as to Ceylon and Malaya. Chinese migrants moved to California and British Columbia, to Peru and Cuba, and later to Australia and the Transvaal. Japanese emigration targeted Hawaii, the U.S. mainland, and Brazil, while Koreans headed mostly to Japan and Manchuria. In the Indian Ocean, Arab merchants from Hadhramaut circulated between the Yemeni coast, East Africa, and the Malay Archipelago. Gujarati traders followed the routes of the British Empire to East Africa, Aden, and London. These flows were not uniform; they ebbed and flowed with political events, commodity prices, and legal regimes.

The coolie trade was a defining labor migration of the nineteenth century, moving roughly two million Indians overseas between the 1830s and the early twentieth century. It emerged in the wake of slavery's abolition, when plantation owners sought new sources of labor. Contracts were typically five-year indentures promising wages and rations. Brokers in port cities advanced money to prospective migrants, often against future earnings, and shipowners packed coolies into quarters that varied from tolerable to appalling. Mortality rates differed by route and vessel, but the system's notoriety grew as scandals broke. Reports from the Indian government and colonial commissions documented abuses, while abolitionist critics condemned the trade as a new form of bonded labor.

Chinese migration followed different legal forms but shared the seafaring tradition of coastal China. The qiaoxiang—emigrant home villages—of Fujian and Guangdong developed networks anchored by lineages, native-place associations, and clan temples. Recruitment could be direct, via kin, or indirect, via brokers known as “coolie traders,” whose role ranged from legitimate employment agencies to kidnappers. Chinese workers went to the goldfields of California and Australia, the railroads of North America, the sugar plantations of Cuba and Peru, and the tin mines of Malaya. In the Americas, some entered under “credit-ticket” arrangements, where passage was advanced and repaid from wages, while others came as free wage laborers, especially after recruitment shifted in the late nineteenth century.

Japanese emigration was smaller in scale but highly organized, often supported by the state and private companies. The first major wave went to Hawaii in the 1880s to work on sugar plantations, with a later flow to the U.S. mainland and Brazil. Japanese migrants arrived with contracts specifying wages, lodging, and repatriation options, and they often maintained close ties to prefectural associations abroad. Unlike many Chinese and Indian migrants, Japanese emigrants benefited from diplomatic protections after Japan's modernization, though they still faced discrimination in host countries. The experience of Japanese migrants highlights how state capacity and international treaties could reshape diaspora trajectories, even as family strategies

and remittance sending remained central to migration decisions.

Korean migration was smaller again and largely shaped by geopolitical upheavals. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Koreans move to Manchuria and the Russian Far East, often as farmers seeking land, while a smaller contingent went to Japan for industrial work. The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 intensified migration to the Japanese empire, where Koreans faced uneven integration and at times coercive labor mobilization. This movement laid foundations for later diaspora communities in Japan and Manchuria, and for remittance flows that connected industrial cities to rural Korean households. Korean diaspora patterns thus illustrate the interplay of empire, displacement, and family survival strategies.

Arab migrations from the Hadhramaut region of southern Yemen were deeply rooted in the Indian Ocean's commercial circuits. Hadrami traders and scholars moved to East Africa, the Malay Archipelago, and South Asia, often establishing themselves as merchants, moneylenders, and religious teachers. Many operated on a "shuttle" basis, spending years abroad before returning home, and maintaining networks through family ties and credit partnerships. Remittances from Hadrami migrants funded religious endowments (waqf) and household consumption in Yemen, while ties to port cities like Zanzibar and Singapore facilitated the circulation of goods and ideas. This diaspora was merchant-led, but it also included laborers and artisans who moved within the same circuits.

Gujarati merchants, many of them from Saurashtra and Ahmedabad, followed the British Empire's commercial routes. They established trading houses in Zanzibar, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam, and later in London and New York. Their networks were characterized by trust-based credit systems, community associations, and careful management of kinship and marriage ties. Some Gujaratis migrated as indentured laborers to the Caribbean, but most entered as traders or shopkeepers. Their presence in East Africa and the Gulf, and later in Europe and North America, created hubs for the circulation of goods, capital, and information. The Gujarati experience shows how merchant diasporas could shape colonial economies and postcolonial business landscapes.

Southeast Asian migration included movements within the region as well as beyond. Malays and Indonesians moved as laborers and sailors between Sumatra, Malaya, Singapore, and Borneo. Javanese migrants went to Suriname under Dutch colonial recruitment, while Bugis sailors traversed the archipelago in search of trade and work. These flows were often seasonal or cyclical, but they created permanent settlements and hybrid identities. In the Malay Peninsula, the growth of tin mining and rubber plantations drew Chinese and Indian labor alongside local workers, forming the multicultural societies that characterize modern Malaysia and Singapore. The intra-regional diaspora was the backbone of many port cities and plantation zones.

Shipboard life was a crucial social space where migration culture took shape. On long voyages, migrants learned shipboard routines, formed friendships, and exchanged information about destinations and employers. Medical inspections at ports—often harsh and humiliating—introduced migrants to colonial governance. Onboard mortality and disease outbreaks could turn ships into sites of trauma, but they also birthed solidarity. The experience of crossing oceans, whether in the coolie deck or the merchant cabin, forged narratives of departure and return that were passed down through family lore. Maritime spaces were thus not just transit corridors but laboratories of diasporic identity.

The politics of passage mattered. Colonial governments regulated migration through passenger acts, contract laws, and quarantine rules. The Indian indenture system, for instance, came under increasing scrutiny after scandals in the 1870s, leading to reforms that attempted to improve conditions. In the Caribbean, court cases challenged contract enforcement and labor discipline. In the Americas, exclusion laws—the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Gentleman’s Agreement with Japan, and later the Immigration Act of 1924—curtailed migration and reshaped diaspora communities. Passports, introduced unevenly in the early twentieth century, made mobility a state-managed right rather than a natural flow, tying migrants more tightly to diplomatic protection and national identity.

Labor markets shaped migration directions and returns. In sugar colonies, wages were low but steady, and remittances became an expected part of household budgets. In goldfields, wages fluctuated with commodity prices, and migrants often shifted between wage labor and independent ventures. On railroads, the work was dangerous and seasonal, but it offered cash for savings and credit. In cities, artisans and shopkeepers found niches that linked them to regional trade. Across these settings, migrants built informal and formal institutions to manage risk: rotating savings clubs, clan associations, temple committees, and informal credit markets. These institutions allowed money to move home even when banking systems were absent or discriminatory.

Remittances were the lifeblood of diaspora economics. In the coolie trade, wages were modest, but small sums regularly reached villages through networks of agents and relatives. In Chinese diaspora communities, the “credit-ticket” system tied remittance repayment to kinship obligations and future opportunities. Japanese migrants used postal savings systems and banks to send money home, often with state support. Remittances financed land, houses, weddings, and education, and they could transform village economies. They also created expectations and obligations, making migrants responsible for relatives left behind. The management of remittance flows—through trust, informal banking, and new financial technologies—became a defining skill of diaspora life.

Race and law intersected in complex ways. Many Asian migrants arrived as colonial subjects, which offered some protections but also exposed them to imperial regulations. In settler colonies like Australia and the United States, migrants faced exclusionary laws that marked them as racially undesirable. In British colonies like South Africa and Kenya, Asian communities navigated segregation and special taxes. In Latin America, migrants often encountered more fluid legal categories, though discrimination persisted. Legal statuses shaped where migrants could go, what work they could do, and how they could organize. Diaspora communities developed strategies to navigate these constraints, from legal challenges to political lobbying.

The Indian Ocean world offers a distinct lens on the diaspora. Monsoon winds structured trade and migration, creating seasonal rhythms and predictable routes. Ports like Zanzibar, Colombo, and Penang served as entrepôts where Arab, Indian, Chinese, and Malay merchants met. The British Empire's "empire of goods" relied on Asian labor and capital, but it also connected Asian migrants to other diasporas, including African, European, and Creole communities. The Indian Ocean's cultural and religious diversity—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity—provided institutional frameworks for migrants, from mosques and temples to missionary schools. These networks made the diaspora porous and cosmopolitan rather than closed.

The Pacific world, shaped by the rise of the United States and Japan, added another layer. The trans-Pacific routes carried Chinese and Japanese labor to the West Coast, and later Korean migration to Hawaii and the mainland. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 accelerated shipping and reduced costs, facilitating new flows of labor and commerce. Pacific port cities—San Francisco, Vancouver, Yokohama, Honolulu—became hubs where migrants encountered racial hierarchies and political movements like anti-Chinese agitation and the Asian Exclusion League. Yet these cities also produced diasporic innovations: Chinese-language newspapers, Japanese-language schools, and pan-Asian associations that forged identities across national borders.

The Atlantic world connected Asian diasporas to African and European migrations. Indentured Indians in the Caribbean and South Africa shared plantation landscapes with Afro-Caribbean communities, creating new cultural syncretisms and political solidarities. In South Africa, the Indian diaspora—led by merchants and laborers—became a key actor in anti-apartheid politics. In Brazil, Japanese migrants formed agricultural colonies that blended Japanese practices with local customs. The Atlantic was not a monolithic space; it produced different models of incorporation, from assimilationist pressures in the United States to plural societies in Trinidad and Guyana. These contrasts show how host societies structured diaspora identities.

The distribution of the diaspora across continents was uneven. At the turn of the twentieth century, Southeast Asia hosted large Chinese and Indian communities in port cities and mining towns. East Africa housed Arab, Indian, and mixed-heritage

trading communities. The Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands held significant Indian populations, while the Americas contained smaller but influential Chinese, Japanese, and Korean communities. These distributions shifted with wars, decolonization, and new migration policies. Yet many core nodes remained constant: Singapore, Hong Kong, Colombo, Zanzibar, Mauritius, Honolulu, San Francisco. These cities became laboratories of diaspora culture and politics.

Household strategies underpinned macro-level flows. Families decided who would migrate, based on landholding, debt, gender roles, and local opportunities. Young men were often the first to leave, but women increasingly joined migration streams, especially after 1900. Remittances were managed collectively: mothers and wives often controlled household budgets, while fathers and sons negotiated wages abroad. Education and marriage decisions were linked to migration prospects. The diaspora was therefore not just an individual project but a family enterprise. Household decision-making balanced risk and return, and it was shaped by both local customs and global market signals.

Religious institutions provided orientation and support. Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries in Ceylon and Malaya served as community centers for migrants. Islamic networks connected Hadrami and Gujarati traders to communities across the Indian Ocean. Christian missions, often tied to colonial education, offered literacy and pathways to employment. Religious festivals, pilgrimages, and rituals created temporal rhythms that aligned diaspora calendars with homeland traditions. These institutions were not static; they adapted to new environments, incorporating local languages and customs while preserving core practices. For many migrants, faith provided a framework for identity and a network for mobility.

Print culture accelerated diaspora formation. Chinese-language newspapers in Singapore and San Francisco circulated news from home and debates about reform. Tamil and Hindi publications in Ceylon and South Africa documented community life and legal struggles. Arabic texts and Islamic journals connected Hadrami communities across oceans. Print created a public sphere that spanned continents, allowing migrants to discuss politics, labor conditions, and cultural preservation. It also enabled organizing—fundraising for schools, petitions to colonial governments, and the articulation of diaspora nationalism. The press turned scattered communities into self-conscious publics.

Education was both a route to mobility and a site of diaspora politics. Mission schools in colonies offered English literacy and technical skills that opened doors to clerical work and civil service. Japanese and Chinese schools abroad maintained language and cultural instruction, often funded by community associations and remittances. In many places, education was contested: colonial authorities sought to produce compliant workers, while diaspora leaders aimed to preserve identity and enable advancement. The competition over curricula—what languages to teach, which histories to

emphasize—reveals how schools were not just classrooms but spaces where the meaning of diaspora was negotiated.

Economic infrastructures co-evolved with migration. Steamship companies formalized routes and timetables, while telegraph lines and postal services allowed rapid communication. Banks and post office savings systems began to handle remittances, though informal channels remained dominant in many contexts. Insurance schemes for migrants—often inadequate—emerged alongside medical inspection regimes. As the twentieth century progressed, new technologies like air travel and container shipping transformed mobility, reducing costs and time. These infrastructures did not just facilitate movement; they shaped who could move, under what terms, and with what protections.

A closer look at ports reveals their strategic importance. In Singapore, the port handled migrants destined for Malaya and beyond, with agencies recruiting labor for rubber and tin. Hong Kong served as a transit hub for Chinese migrants heading to Southeast Asia and the Americas. Calcutta and Madras processed indentured laborers for the Indian Ocean and Atlantic. Zanzibar hosted Arab and Indian traders bound for the East African interior. Honolulu acted as a waystation for Pacific crossings. Each port had its own regulatory environment, health protocols, and labor markets, producing distinct migration cultures that influenced where migrants went and how they adapted.

Diaspora was also a politics of belonging. Migrants navigated multiple jurisdictions: colonial authorities, imperial governments, and later nation-states. Some sought naturalization; others retained allegiance to ancestral homelands. Political movements abroad—from the Indian National Congress's diaspora branches to Chinese revolutionary fundraising—sought to harness migrant resources for home country causes. In some cases, diaspora activism supported home rule or independence; in others, it reinforced local political identities. The question of citizenship—whether migrants could belong—became central, especially as exclusion laws and racial segregation limited rights. Diaspora politics thus moved between accommodation and resistance.

Mapping the diaspora also means attending to gendered patterns. While early migration was predominantly male, women increasingly migrated as wives, daughters, students, and workers after 1900. In plantation economies, women's labor was critical to household survival; in urban economies, women entered domestic service, nursing, and clerical work. Gendered norms shaped who could migrate, under what conditions, and with what protections. Family reunification became a key driver of migration in the twentieth century, especially after wars and decolonization. The feminization of migration transformed remittance flows and care responsibilities, linking diaspora households to global labor markets.

Crises punctuated diaspora life. Epidemics—cholera, plague, influenza—disrupted migration and killed thousands, leading to tightened health regulations. Economic depressions reduced demand for labor and closed borders. Wars—World War I, World War II, the Korean War—redrew maps and displaced populations. Refugees joined migrants in movement, and diaspora communities became both sanctuaries and sites of vulnerability. Yet crises also produced innovation: new financial instruments, political alliances, and survival strategies. The history of the diaspora is not a smooth ascent; it is a story of adaptation to repeated shocks, with networks serving as shock absorbers.

Decolonization transformed the legal and political landscape. New states emerged in Asia and Africa, inheriting colonial migration policies and multiethnic populations. Some nations embraced multiculturalism; others pursued assimilation or exclusion. The end of empire redirected migration flows: postcolonial migrants often headed to former metropolises—Britain, France, the Netherlands—or to new economic hubs like Singapore and Hong Kong. Citizenship laws changed, and diaspora communities renegotiated identities in relation to both ancestral homelands and new nation-states. The postcolonial period thus reconfigured the diaspora map, even as old networks persisted.

The late twentieth century saw new migrations: skilled professionals to North America and Europe, laborers to the Gulf oil economies, and students to universities worldwide. These flows built on earlier infrastructures—shipping lines, remittance circuits, community associations—while introducing new dynamics like transnational families and digital communication. The Asian diaspora expanded into global cities—Los Angeles, London, Dubai, Sydney—where it contributed to finance, technology, health care, and the arts. Yet the persistence of informal banking, hometown associations, and cultural festivals shows how contemporary diasporas remain rooted in historical practices and networks.

The twenty-first century adds new layers. Digital platforms and fintech have reduced remittance costs and increased speed, but they also create new vulnerabilities—data security, regulatory crackdowns, and unequal access. Climate change is reshaping mobility, with rising seas and extreme weather affecting coastal communities in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Migration policies oscillate between openness and restriction, reflecting global anxieties about labor and security. The Asian diaspora continues to evolve, but its core features—family strategies, networked trust, and remittance economies—remain remarkably resilient. Mapping the diaspora now requires overlays of digital flows, climate risks, and new regulatory maps.

To map the Asian diaspora, 1800–present, is to track the interplay of movement and settlement, of labor and capital, of law and culture. It is to follow ships and cables, wages and remittances, temples and newspapers, across oceans that once seemed

barriers but now appear as connectors. The chapters that follow zoom in on specific regions and themes—coolie trades, merchant networks, plantations and port cities, Pacific migrations, island labor, Indian Ocean circuits—while keeping sight of the larger grid. The diaspora is not an endpoint but a process: a set of routes and relationships that continue to shape economies and identities in Asia and beyond.

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