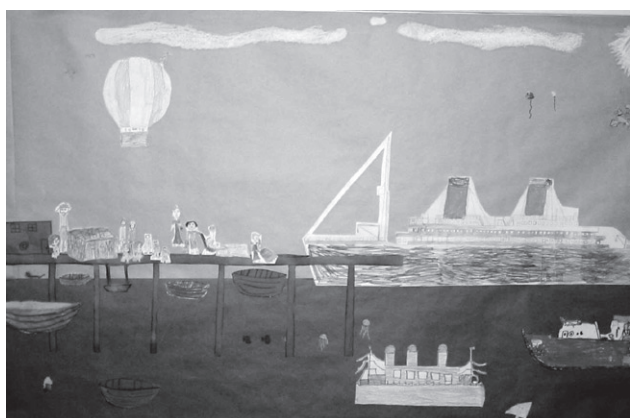
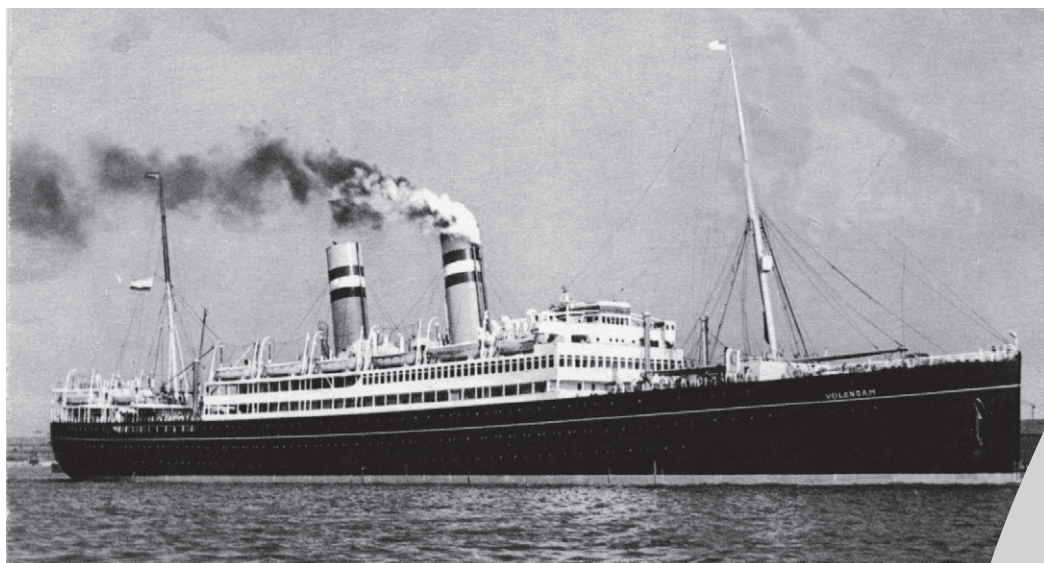


# The changing order of mobility in Asia



Return is an integral part of any migration flow. Between 1870 and 1940, one quarter to one third of the transatlantic migrants returned to Europe, which translates to 10 million.

Xiang Biao

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD, 14.7 million people departed from the ports of Xiamen, Shantou and Hong Kong in south China between 1869 and 1939, primarily for Southeast Asia, and 11.6 million returned through the three ports between 1873 and 1939 (Sugihara 2005: 247-50). More noteworthy than the magnitude of large-scale return are the significant social changes it is inherently related to. The return of South Asians to the subcontinent following the independence of India in 1947, Chinese in Southeast Asia to the newly founded PRC in the 1950s and 1960s, and more recently, Viet kieu to socialist Vietnam, are just a few examples. Regarded as an unquestionable right and an incontestable duty at once, 'return' is both enormously emotional and deeply political.

The current waves of return migration reflect certain global conditions of this particular historical juncture. A new regime of return migration is emerging worldwide. Large numbers of refugees were repatriated to their home countries after the end of the Cold War, either because of the resumed normalcy, or simply because of a redefinition of political risks by the west, especially in former communist countries. The United Nations Refugee Agency declared the 1990s to be the 'decade of repatriation'. On another front, concerned with the alleged increase in irregular migrants and 'bogus asylum seekers', receiving states enforce return as a means of countering the unwanted inflows. More recently, various European countries attempt to reinvent the guest worker programme in order to mitigate labour shortage without leading to migrants' long-term settlement. The catchword is 'circular migration', of which return is a defining feature. Frank Field (2008), a UK Parliament Member, called for a 'one man in, one man out' migration scenario. In Asia, circular migration has been the default pattern of labour mobility.

Voluntary return migrations also increase due to changes in the global economy. In most parts of Asia, return nowadays is an enterprising project, instead of an exercise due to nostalgia. Returning to China or India from the west, for example, is perceived as a 'return to the future' – to be ahead of global business and technology curves. Finally, return migration is also related to the politics of nationalism and identities. In South Korea and Japan, for example, ethno-nationalism both encourages and is energised by the return of ethnic Koreans and Japanese from overseas.

Despite the burgeoning literature on transnational migration in Asia, however, research on return remains scarce. The workshop Return Migration in Asia, held in July 2008 at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, brought various streams of return migration to light. Apart from examining return as an important migration phenomenon, the workshop interrogated it as a powerful social political and ideological notion, and opened up the concept of 'return' as a strategic moment redefining economic, social and political relations in the region.

The following four essays were among the over 40 papers presented at the workshop. Koji Sasaki's article traces the little known debates among Japanese migrants in Brazil about return throughout the first half of the 20th century, and demonstrates how 'return' served as a central idiom in the migrants' negotiation of their political positionality in the changing global geopolitical order. Wang Cangbai tells us how the Chinese state turned returnees into a special policy subject in the 1950s in the process of socialist nation building. Sylvia Cowan follows the journey of former Cambodian refugees who were forced to return by the US government despite being US permanent residents. Forced return helps maintain law and order in the US from the state's point of view, but creates disruptions and disorder for the deportees and their family. Finally, Xiang Biao's piece about labour migration in East Asia highlights how compulsory return has become an indispensable policy tool for the authorities to manage migration. Return is enforced through complex collaborations between the state, the employer, the recruiter and other public and private institutions.

Above:  
The Chinese character  
回, meaning return.

Running through the four essays is the common concern with the intersection between the logic of territory upon which state sovereignty and the political order is based, and the logic of mobility which is essential for the globalising economy. The intersection manifests itself as different configurations at different historical stages and in different cases. The essays collectively demonstrate that return migration warrants serious research not only because it is important in itself, but also because it constitutes a productive lens to delineate the changing pattern of mobility and the evolving global geopolitical order in general. More conference papers in the full version will take the form of collective publications in due course.

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