

Right: Natives of Arrakan selling slaves to the Dutch at Pipely/Baliapal, India in January, 1663. Wouter Schouten, *Reys-togten naar en door Oost-Indien: in welke, de voornaamste landen, koningryken, steden, eylanden, Bergen, en rivieren, met haare eigenschmeten, beneffens de wetten, godsdiens, zeden en dragten der inwoonders, en watverder zoo van dieren, vrugten, en planten aanmerkelyks in die gewesten is; naauwkeurig word beschreven* [Travels in the East Indies...], 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Andries van Damme, 1708). Author's collection.



Human trafficking in Asia before 1900: a preliminary census

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The often egregious exploitation of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Persian Gulf and East Asia is frequently cited as evidence that 27-32 million mostly Asian men, women, and children remain *de facto* slaves in the early twenty-first century.¹ That these workers are characterized as 'slaves' despite the abolition of slavery worldwide comes as no surprise. Many indentured labor historians, echoing the concerns of nineteenth-century British abolitionists, have argued that the 3.7 million contractual workers, mostly from India and China but also from Africa, Indochina, Java, Japan, and Melanesia, who migrated throughout and beyond the colonial plantation world between the 1830s and 1920s were the victims of a 'new system of slavery' that developed following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834.² A striking feature of discussions about the slave, indentured, and cognate labor trades that flourished during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries is the propensity to view them as historical developments separate and distinct unto themselves. Recent scholarship on European slave trading in the Indian Ocean demonstrates, however, that this conceptual apartheid is no longer sustainable, and that a deeper understanding of these migrant labor systems is contingent upon situating them in more fully developed historical and comparative contexts.³

The same can be said about human trafficking in Asia. While research over the last half century has established that some 12,521,000 men, women, and children were exported from sub-Saharan Africa to the Americas between 1500 and 1866,⁴ it is becoming increasingly apparent that transnational/pan-regional slave trading elsewhere in the globe was also massive. The trans-Saharan and western Indian Ocean trades exported an estimated 10.9-11.6 million Africans toward the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia between 650 and 1900.⁵ Perhaps one million enslaved Europeans from as far north as Britain, Ireland, and Iceland reached North Africa's Barbary Coast between 1500 and 1800, while 800,000-900,000 or more North Africans landed in Italy, Portugal, and Spain between 1450 and 1800.⁶ Europeans also trafficked large numbers of slaves beyond the Atlantic. British, Danish, Dutch, French, and Portuguese traders exported a minimum of 450,000-565,000 Africans, Indians, and Southeast Asians to European establishments within the Indian Ocean basin between 1500 and 1850, while the Manila galleons carried tens of thousands of Asian slaves to Central and South America during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷

Missing from this picture is a comprehensive sense of the volume of human trafficking in Asia. Assessing the scale of this activity is not an easy task. The paucity of archival materials on slaving and slavery in Asia compared to what exists for the Atlantic world is a major impediment to reconstructing these trades, all the more so when these sources are widely scattered, often fragmentary and difficult to interpret, and require a command of multiple European and Asian languages. Our lack of knowledge also reflects many Asian historians' reluctance to acknowledge slavery's existence in their own countries, much less examine local records for information about slaving and slavery in the locale under consideration. A review of recently published scholarship demonstrates, however, that these evidentiary hurdles are not insurmountable, and that it now is possible to outline a preliminary census of transnational human trafficking in a part of the globe that encompasses four major regions: Central Asia (including modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand (Siam), Vietnam); and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea).

Importing slaves into Asia

At the heart of any such exercise must be an acknowledgement of the extraordinary diversity of peoples trafficked within and beyond Asia and these trades' complexity and multi-directionality. The presence of military slaves known as *Habshis* ('Ethiopians') in India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and the existence of *Siddi* communities of eastern African ancestry in modern India and Pakistan underscore that any history of human trafficking must include the African slaves imported into Asia over the centuries.⁸ Current estimates suggest that Arab, Muslim, and Swahili merchants exported an average of 2,000-3,000 slaves a year from the Red Sea and East African coasts to the Middle East and South Asia between 800-1700, and 2,000-4,000 a year during the eighteenth century. A paucity of data on the number of Africans in India at any given time makes it impossible to determine how many of these 2.0-3.1 million exports reached South Asia rather than the Middle East, but reports, such as those that Ahmadabad in Gujarat housed 5,000 *Habshis* between 1526-37 and that the chief minister of the Ahmadnagar sultanate in the Deccan purchased 1,000 *Habshi* slaves during the latter part of the sixteenth century, indicate that substantial numbers did so.

Europeans also transported Africans to South Asia, and beyond. The Portuguese shipped slaves from Mozambique to their establishments in India (e.g., Daman, Diu, Goa), China (Macau), and Japan (Nagasaki) as well as to the Philippines, especially during the union of the Portuguese and Spanish

crowns (1580–1640). Although Portuguese ships reportedly carried ‘great numbers’ of Mozambican slaves to India at the end of the sixteenth century, by most accounts these exports averaged 125–250 a year for a total of at least 42,000–84,000 exports between 1500 and 1834.⁹ Other Europeans began to participate in this traffic during the early seventeenth century. The scale of Dutch involvement is suggested by reports that the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, or VOC) shipped at least 4,700 Africans to its administrative center at Batavia (Jakarta), commercial emporia such as Malacca (Melaka), its spice plantations in the Moluccas (Malukus), and its settlements in coastal Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during the seventeenth century, and used 4,000 African slaves to construct a fortress at Colombo during the 1670s. British East India Company (EIC) ships carried a minimum of 3,100 Malagasy, Mozambican, Comorian, and West African slaves to the company’s settlements in India (Bombay, Fort St. David [Tegnapatam], Madras, Surat) and its factories in Java (Bantam/Banten) and Sumatra (Bencoolen/Benkulen/Bengkulu) between the 1620s and early 1770s.

Trafficking slaves in South and Southeast Asia

India not only imported but also exported slaves to other regional markets. Hundreds of thousands of enslaved Hindus crossed the Hindu Kush into Central Asia between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries,¹⁰ while Indian and other Asian merchants probably shipped a minimum of 600,000 Indians to Southeast Asia between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Europeans began to traffic Indian slaves no later than 1510, when 24 individuals were transported to Portugal from Cochin (Kochi) on the Malabar Coast. The size of the Portuguese trade is difficult to determine, but assertions that Portuguese ships exported as many as 5,000–6,000 slaves from India in some years during the second half of the sixteenth century suggest that this traffic was relatively substantial at the height of the *Estado da Índia*’s power and influence. The VOC actively traded Indian slaves as well, exporting at least 26,000–38,000 and perhaps 100,000 or more men, women, and children to Batavia (Jakarta), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malacca (Melaka), and elsewhere in Southeast Asia during the seventeenth century. Indians accounted for 26 percent (16,300) of an estimated 63,000 slaves imported into the Cape of Good Hope between 1652 and 1808. The British and French likewise trafficked South Asian slaves. Beginning in 1622, EIC officials shipped Indians to the company’s factories at Bantam and Bencoolen and its colony of St. Helena in the South Atlantic. The French exported as many as 24,000 slaves from Bengal and *comptoirs* along the Coromandel and Malabar coasts to the Mascarene Islands of Mauritius and Réunion in the southwestern Indian Ocean between the 1670s and 1790s, mostly between 1770 and the early 1790s, while slaves from the ‘coasts of India’ even reached Saint Domingue on occasion.

These trades were facilitated by the existence of large slave populations in the subcontinent.¹¹ Contemporary sources report an abundance of inexpensive slaves in northern India during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), while hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children were enslaved during the Mughal wars of expansion during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Warfare in southern India, for example, supplied many of the captives exported by the VOC during six boomlets during the seventeenth century, while the famines that ravaged parts of the subcontinent periodically generated additional tens of thousands of slaves for both export and domestic markets as desperate people sold themselves, and especially their children, into slavery in attempts to stay alive.

The incidence of involuntary bondage varied widely in Southeast Asia. While west Java housed relatively few slaves at the beginning of the eighteenth century, bondmen and -women comprised 10 percent of the population among certain groups in Sarawak,



In the early 17th century, Pulicat became the capital of what was known as the Dutch Coromandel, on India’s east coast. Initially established (first by the Portuguese, later by the Dutch) as a trading port for textiles, diamonds, and spices, it soon became an important trading hub of slaves from India. During the 17th century the VOC exported perhaps as many as 100,000 or more Indian slaves to its possessions in Ceylon, Indonesia, and South Africa. Image courtesy of Wikimedia, reproduced under a CC license.

15 percent of the population on the island of Nias off Sumatra’s west coast, and as much as 30 percent of the population among the Batak and Toraja on Sulawesi. Extensive trading networks moved hundreds of thousands of slaves throughout and beyond the region. Slaves from islands in the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos such as Alor, Buton, Manggarai, Mindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Timor reached Makassar from whence they were re-exported, together with Bugi and Torajan slaves from Sulawesi, to Aceh in Java, Banjarmasin and Sukadana in Borneo, Jambi and Palembang in Sumatra, and as far away as Ayudhya in Siam. Slaves accounted for 14.1–21.7 percent of the value of major commodity imports at Makassar between 1720 and the 1780s, and 22.5–33.7 percent of the value of the port’s major exports during the same period. Perhaps 200,000–300,000 slaves arrived in Batavia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one-half of whom were probably imported by the VOC, company employees engaged in private trade, and Batavian entrepreneurs, while Chinese and local merchants based elsewhere in the region supplied the balance of such imports. Other locales also handled large numbers of bondmen and -women. Bali exported an estimated 100,000–150,000 slaves between 1620 and 1830, while slave raiding generated 200,000–300,000 imports into the southern Philippines’ Sulu sultanate between 1770 and 1870.¹² Southeast Asian slaves also reached the western Indian Ocean. Some 14,300 ‘Malays’ were landed in the Cape Colony between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. Thousands more, including individuals identified specifically as Balinese, likewise arrived in the Mascarenes during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, perhaps 3,800–4,750 of whom were exported during the illicit slave trade to the islands, which flourished between 1811 and the early 1830s.

Central and East Asian slave trades

Although information on human trafficking in Central and East Asia remains sparse, recent scholarship reveals the existence of extensive trading networks that handled large numbers of slaves.¹³ Hundreds of thousands of Persian Shi’ites as well as Indian Hindus reached Central Asian markets after 1500. Persians comprised the majority of the region’s slave population during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; the cities of Khwarazm and Bukhara, for example, each housed populations of 30,000–60,000 mostly Iranian slaves during the nineteenth century. Central Asian peoples likewise fell victim to enslavement. Turkic slave regiments

formed the nucleus of most armies in the eastern Islamic world by the eleventh century. The Mongols routinely enslaved and sold Kipchaks and other Turkic peoples during the thirteenth century, while Mongols themselves were sometimes reduced to slavery. Overall, an estimated 6.0–6.4 million Central Asians were trafficked into the Black Sea region, the Mediterranean world, and the Ottoman Empire between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴

Millions more were held in bondage in East Asia. Slaves comprised approximately 30 percent of Korea’s population from the eleventh into the eighteenth century. The complexities of defining slave status in China make it difficult to determine how widespread slavery was in the Middle Kingdom, but arguments that at least 2 percent of an early seventeenth-century population of 150–160 million were described variously as ‘slaves’ or ‘bondservants’ (e.g., *nubi*, *nuli*, *nupu*, *bandang*) suggest that large numbers of men, women, and children endured lives of servitude. Historians have long held that China housed one of the globe’s largest markets in human beings before 1949, a market supplied in part from foreign sources such as Vietnam, which exported thousands of women and girls to southern China during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and probably long before then as well.¹⁵ Recent research reveals the existence of well-developed domestic slave trading networks during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Guangdong, for instance, exported slaves from its coastal areas to inland regions while receiving the same from Guangxi and beyond. These networks also supplied slaves to the Portuguese *comptoir* at Macau, established in 1557, which, in addition to Chinese slaves, received perhaps 16,400–24,400 Japanese and Korean slaves via the Portuguese factory at Nagasaki between the late 1550s and 1600.¹⁶ Slaves flowed in turn from Macau to the Spanish-controlled Philippines, from whence thousands of South, Southeast, and East Asian slaves were carried across the Pacific to Mexico and Peru during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Chinese slaves also reached Portuguese Goa and Mozambique as well as Mauritius during the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

These admittedly incomplete and problematic data highlight the need for migrant labor historians to transcend the current preoccupation in slavery studies with the Atlantic world, to recognize that slaving was a complex global phenomenon, and to appreciate that reconstructing the history of human trafficking in Asia is integral to understanding the human experience with

slave, bonded, and other forms of coerced labor. Equally important, these data highlight the need for students of modern slavery to be aware of the historical foundations upon which late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century human trafficking rests, and to situate this activity in more fully developed local, regional, pan-regional, and comparative contexts. Coming to terms with human trafficking in Asia requires us, for example, to consider the extent and ways in which trades in chattel or servile labor were linked to long-distance commerce in other important commodities or associated with ‘free’ migrant labor networks. There is reason to believe that many, if not most, of the Indian and Southeast Asian slaves who reached Mauritius and Réunion during the eighteenth century did so in relatively small groups who comprised just one component of cargoes that included large quantities of foodstuffs, textiles, and other manufactured goods. Research on migrant labor networks in pre- and early colonial India, especially Orissa, likewise raises questions about whether slave trading and free migrant labor networks overlapped and, if so, to what extent, in what ways, and why did they do so. In sum, coming to grips with human trafficking requires us to abandon the conceptual and other blinders that hinder our ability to understand the human experience with chattel and bonded labor, both past and present, in all of its challenging complexity.

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Notes

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