An Asian Perspective on Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies

Claude Chevaleyre

Title according to Harvard catalogue: "Kidnapped girls, Foochow, found hidden in a junk by customs inspector. These girls would have been sold for slaves. Chinese characters on mount, left of image." Picture taken in Fuzhou in 1904. ©image public domain. Harvard-Yenching Library of the Harvard College Library, Harvard University.[1]

AN "ASIAN" PERSPECTIVE ON STRONG ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCIES

by Claude Chevaleyre

Over the past two decades, the fields of slavery and labor history have undergone profound and lasting reconfigurations; not only empirically, but also conceptually. Most historians now seem to agree that the study of slavery, bondage, coerced labor and other forms of asymmetrical dependency across time and space requires new and more dynamic analytical frameworks. Following the inspiring recommendations formulated by Joseph Miller in 2012 (*The Problem of Slavery as History*), historians are increasingly called upon to better historicize and contextualize strong asymmetrical dependencies, instead of relying on a limited set of static, sociologically defined and mutually excluding categories such as "slavery," "serfdom," etc. More precisely, they are called upon to better *situate* these phenomena: not only in time and space, but also in a more relational and connected way: in particular by investigating the coexistence of and the interactions between different regimes of labor coercion at the local, regional and global levels; and by paying renewed attention to trajectories of change, in order to better understand how forms of asymmetrical dependency were produced, reproduced, transformed and, ultimately, how their legacies contributed to shaping the power dynamics of our modern societies (see M. van Rossum, "Reflections on Comparing and Connecting Regimes of Slavery and Coerced Labour," in *Slavery and Bondage in Asia, 1550–1850*, 2023).

Within this trend of new research inspired by global slavery and global labor studies, investigations into slavery across early modern Asia recently developed at a steady pace. Compared to the handful of books available at the turn of the twenty-first century (some of which still emphasized the "mild", "non-economic" and "assimilative" nature of slavery and bondage across Asia as a whole), readers and researchers now have a larger number of monographs, edited books, articles, and even datasets at their disposal (thanks in great part to the network of historians formed less than ten years ago around the project "Exploring Slave Trade in Asia" supported by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam). However, although Asia and the Indian Ocean World are no longer the blind spots they once were in labor and slavery studies, these vast areas are still somewhat marginal and overwhelmingly studied through the lens of early modern European colonialism and imperialism. From the sixteenth century onward, the Europeans who first sailed to Asia in search of highly prized commodities indeed played a key role in the rapid expansion of the slave trade and other multidirectional flows of coerced labor across Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the wider world. While enslaved Africans reached Goa, Macau, Manila, Batavia and Japan in the second half of the sixteenth century, people born in Asia were also forcibly transported around the world. One example is a young man known as Diego, who claimed to have been enslaved in the Spanish territory of Liampo in China, transported to Mexico and from there to Sevilla, where he eventually attempted to contest the legality of his enslavement in 1572 (see Nancy E. van Deusen, "Indios on the Move in the Sixteenth-Century Iberian World", *The Journal of Global History*, 2015).

However, European slaving networks did not emerge out of a vacuum. Slaving warfare was already frequent across much of early modern South and Southeast Asia, from South China to the Shan states; enslaved people (in particular Korean women) were an integral part of the tributary exchanges between the Chinese Ming court and its neighboring "vassal" countries. Endogenous slavery was also on the rise in China (perhaps numbering in millions) at the time when the Portuguese established a settlement in Macau in the mid-sixteenth century; around thirty percent of the population of Chosŏn Korea was composed of private and public slaves (until the two Korean abolitions of the nineteenth century), while the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592–1598) produced significant numbers of captives, some of whom were transported to Japan before being funneled into the Portuguese slaving networks; the Manchu territorial expansion, from the mid-seventeenth century onward, not only put Manchu slavery in contact with Chinese slaving practices, but also produced more captives than the Manchu banners could absorb, resulting in the marketization of tens if not hundreds of thousands of people, in addition to those who regularly fell victims to traffickers or were sold for different purposes as a result of famines and environmental disasters. In other words, the Europeans inserted themselves into an environment where slaving practices had existed prior to their arrival, and where those practices persisted and evolved alongside and in connection with their activities across Asia.

Manchu-Chinese "licence" of the Board of Revenues acknowledging the sales of an enslaved person, 1705. Photo by Mr. Li Jihui 李集辉, 2011.

The problem, so to speak, is *not* that the recent and long overdue revision of the history of slaving and coerced labor across early modern Asia focuses on the European presence and has been written almost exclusively from the vast and rich sources produced by European actors – thereby reproducing European worldviews and omitting a wide array of local and regional practices. The problem, rather, is that this rapidly growing body of research is barely complemented by new studies of the ubiquitous forms of exploitation and forced displacement that existed before, alongside and beyond the European presence in Asia. What seems to be particularly lacking in current discussions is thus an *emic perspective from Asia*; that is to say, a more

[1] This is a typical photograph of the early 20th c. used, among other things, to mobilize Western charity, to illustrate the scope of trafficking in China, or the coolie trade. The context is quite unclear. The Chinese text on the left tells a different story than the one of the Harvard catalogue (which only mentions girls). Roughly translated: Junk of the Lin Qinglan company [related to the fleet of the Fuzhou arsenal] captured 23 traffickers at sea and [rescued] 41 male and female children, now dispatched to foster home and awaiting to be retrieved.

granular and accurate view of the practices and norms and their evolutions, from existing vernacular sources (written, oral and material) and from the actors' experiences, categories and worldviews. What also seems to be lacking is a genuine accounting of Asian historiographies, as well as a proper assessment of the legacies and memories of these diverse phenomena in the contemporary societies of Asia.

Deed of emancipation of a "household slave" (jianu 家奴), 1712. Photo by Mr. Li Jihui 李集辉, 2011.

This observation leads not only to the obvious conclusion that more research – in the form of situated case studies – is required: it also calls for a critical and open assessment of the impediments that have and still do affect this necessary development. The availability of source materials only partly explains the current state of the field. It is true that enslavement and coerced labor in early modern Asian societies left fewer and less systematic traces, at least compared to the very extensive paper trails produced by European colonists. But sources do exist, for instance, to document the scope of trafficking in early modern China and its broader ramifications, even though these sources are scattered and necessarily less complete due to the illegal nature of trafficking in the Ming and Qing eras. More importantly, historians of Asia also have to acknowledge and to reflect on the fact that the evocative force of the term "slavery," used as *the* central reference category by which all forms of coercion and dependency have to be evaluated, has made its usage highly contentious when applied to contexts where the word "slave" and all its variants in European languages were not known, and were not part of the language of the actors. In other words, translation and categorization matter because they are always sources of distortions (often unintended, but sometimes intentional) that can have ideological and political implications, which in turn can have an impact on how a specific phenomenon can be studied. The historiography of China, for instance, has generally avoided "slavery" as a category to characterize the forms of bondage that expanded in Ming times and persisted at least until their legal abolition in 1910. During the second half of the twentieth century, those forms of bondage were mainly regarded as manifestations of the general feudal exploitation which the Chinese working class in the making was subjected to (while slavery was considered to be incompatible with a feudal context). More recently, these forms of bondage have been re-qualified as a mere form of household "service," mostly under the growing influence of the "great divergence" framework, a development model that does not make room for the observation of high levels of coercion in China at the moment of its divergence from Europe (C. Chevaleyre, "What Happened to Coercion?", *Le movement social*, 2023).

Taking an "Asian perspective" on strong asymmetrical dependencies is therefore not only a matter of pluralization and geographic expansion of the field. It is also a way to explore broader connections and interactions, and to address a wider range of issues, such as the hegemonic domination of categories exclusively derived from the European past. These issues and many others will be central topics of discussion at the conference "Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies: Perspectives from Asia, Past and Present" that the team of scholars working on Asia at the BCDSS is organizing for May 2025.

SAVE THE DATE:
6-8 MAY 2025
CONFERENCE
„STRONG ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCIES: PERSPECTIVES FROM ASIA"

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'Dutch merchant with two enslaved men in hilly landscape' (presumably in Asia, 1700-1725). Oil on canvas; collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (SK-A-4988) ©public domain: http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.431082

'COUNTLESS STOLEN PEOPLE':

UNRAVELLING THE DYNAMICS OF WIDER INDIAN OCEAN SLAVE TRADING WITH THE ESTA DATABASE

by Pascal Konings

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE WIDER INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

Since the 1980s, scholars have increasingly recognized that slavery and the slave trade were widely practiced across maritime Asia from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Re-evaluations of available data and previously overlooked sources have yielded new perspectives on the mechanics of the slave trade, particularly in regions like the Western Indian Ocean and South(east) Asia. In fact, recent research indicates that the scale of slave trading in the Indian Ocean and maritime Asia rivalled, or may even have surpassed, that of the Atlantic. Studies have produced new data, shedding light on the structural involvement of European colonial powers in a vast network of intra-Asian slave trading, such as the Dutch East India Company (Dutch: *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, usually shortened to VOC), the British East India Company (EIC), or the French *Compagnie des Indes orientales* (CdI). Other major European players active in Asia and the Indian Ocean were Spain and Portugal, whose early colonization practices in the Americas and Asia were quite influential and quickly adopted by other colonial powers. And although slave trading in Asia was widely established long before the presence of European colonizers, their participation and appropriation would thoroughly transform it, impacting many societies locally, regionally, and globally.