

Enslaved Worlds: Colonial Encounters and Coercion in Early Modern Asia

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1. Slavery, colonialism, and the Asian setting

Colonialism as a historical phenomenon is, in its broadest definition, the subjugation and exploitation of a geographical area by any external power. The phenomenon is commonly associated with Western overseas expansion; for example, sociologist Gurinder Bhambra argues that ‘colonialism is a distinctively modern phenomenon which, in turn, gives European overseas empires a character different from other empires contemporaneous with them. This difference rests, in large part, in the specificity of a political economy of colonialism that is often misidentified as a separate capitalist modernity’.¹ Others may argue that it could be perpetrated by any dominant group. Thus, one may speak of Chinese colonialism in Inner Asia in the Qing period, Japanese colonialism in Korea and Taiwan in the modern era, and so on.² The object of colonial enterprises can be either overseas and at relatively close distance, as shown by Swedish and Norwegian colonialism in Sápmi (the land of the Sami people), early modern English policy in Ireland, or the Indonesian exploitation of western Papua. The broader definition of the term also presents challenges on how to use it as an analytical tool, since all types of discrimination of disadvantaged and geographically defined populations might conceivably be claimed as ‘colonialism’.³ There are, however, some distinguishing features. The process of colonisation usually entails discriminatory practices towards outlying or overseas areas to keep the original populations in a subservient state, at worst extermination. This is commonly accompanied by cultural othering of these populations, ranging from exoticism to demonisation and very often entailing overt or implicit racialisation. All this is entwined with an idea of the right of the dominant ethnicity or nation to exploit resources in the subordinated territory. That these

¹ Bhambra, ‘Empires and Colonialism’, p. 192.

² Hennessey, *Rule by Association*.

³ Sultan, ‘What Is Colonialism?’, pp. 1–2.

practices include slavery and coerced labour is evident from innumerable cases all over the world, and this is the focus of the present volume which deals with colonial-tinged slaving in Asia and adjacent seascapes from the 16th to the 19th centuries. As will be apparent from the ten contributions, European-driven colonial processes intersected with a variety of Asian forms of economic coercion and hierarchy to maintain systems of exploitation and trading in humans.⁴

Then, are there distinct Asian characteristics of slavery, as juxtaposed to a European-Atlantic system? At the heart of the matter, the answer is probably no. The late Joseph Miller, in his global synthesis *The Problem of Slavery as History*, has posited that slavery is not a sociological institution. Rather, slaving can be problematised as a historical strategy that arises out of multiple contexts.⁵ Climate, demography, cultural tradition, and political conditions have enabled societies to keep unprivileged groups in bondage in quite different ways, from the Siberian taiga to the Sumatran rice fields. However, Jeff Fynn-Paul has tentatively argued that Asian together with African slaverries tend to have some characteristic features that set them apart from Atlantic and Middle Eastern forms.⁶ The legal status is often vague and elusive, and there is usually no clear-cut concept of 'free' as against 'slave'. What we call slaves were dependents under their masters in a highly vertical system of social relations. Similar to Africa, Asian slaverries often tended to be 'open', meaning that their status was flexible and they could eventually be absorbed into the majority society, in contrast with the racialised Atlantic 'closed' system where slave status tended to be permanent up to the 19th century and the slaves or ex-slaves would hardly merge with white society (although this did not entirely apply to the situation in Latin America).⁷ The 'open' type slaverries were also often relatively mild, although this should not be exaggerated. There were nevertheless Asian slave regimes that were closed and could be as brutal as anywhere else. An obvious contrast with the Atlantic type was the mostly non-racialised character of Asian slavery, as enslaved people would be much less distinguishable from their masters in terms of phenotype – that is, as long as European actors were not involved. Slave castes were known, especially in South Asia, but the physical features of such cast members were hardly different from the dominating castes. Asian slaves also performed a large variety of tasks and were not tied to plantation labour to the same extent as in the Atlantic world.⁸ All this, of course, should be regarded as broad tendencies. There is clear evidence of enslaved Asians being

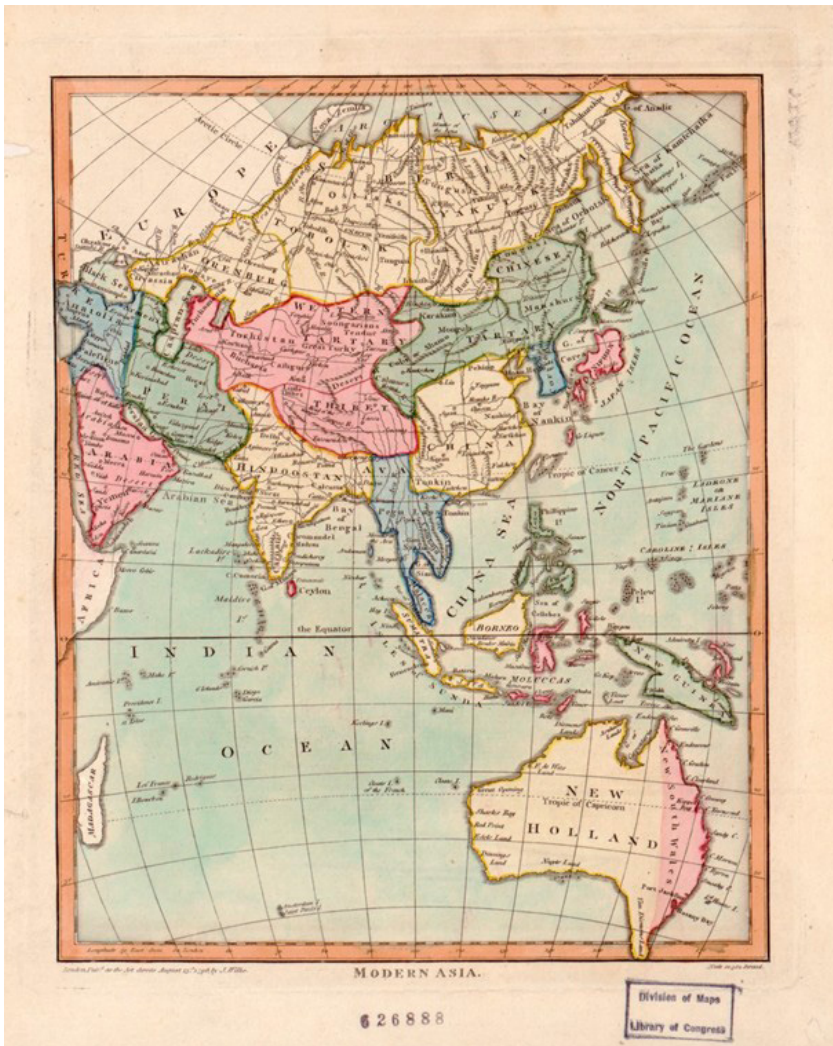
⁴ This Introduction will be relatively brief in terms of the historiography of slavery. For fuller references to the work published in recent decades, see Richard Allen's Afterword, in this volume.

⁵ Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, p. 25.

⁶ Fynn-Paul, 'Slavery in Asia and Global Slavery', pp. 343–359.

⁷ Reid, 'Closed' and 'Open' Slave Systems in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia'.

⁸ Fynn-Paul, 'Slavery in Asia and Global Slavery', p. 349; Campbell, 'Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour in the Indian Ocean World', pp. vii–xxiv.



Map o.1. Map of Asia from 1796

tied to plantation work in the French, Dutch and the English territories. On the other hand, a considerable number of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas spent their lives working in urban spaces rather than in plantations, performing tasks that were in many ways similar to the tasks carried out by enslaved Asians. Moreover, Asia is a large continent with all types of climates and socio-economic forms, and the frequent demographic, religious and technological movements have made for an abundance of forms over the millennia.

Now, the dichotomy between European and Asian slaveries is blurred when we look at the impact of settlers and colonisers from the West in various parts of Asia after 1500. Miller has warned against seeing European-led slaving economies as reproducing legal frameworks and notions from the European tradition of slaving. Rather, encounters with overseas milieus are marked by hybridity where possibilities of shoring up economic advantage through slave labour is contingent on local preconditions. In the contact zones, ideas about the ownership of bodies and work are likely to influence each other, formally or informally. This process is reflected in several chapters of the present volume, in two ways. First, they demonstrate how Western merchants, settlers, administrators and raiders interacted with communities and agents in Asia and the Indian Ocean world; in other words, how cultural and economic processes engendered ever-new forms of enslavement and allocation of coerced labour. Second, they recover the impact of enslavement and the huge numbers of people involved. Through systematic and methodologically innovative analyses of archival data, they reveal that slaving was far from marginal in the larger region of the Indian Ocean and beyond, and was likely in the dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade.

2. Who is a slave?

Adjacent to this is the by now classical problem of defining a ‘slave’. Looking at the Asian map of coerced labour, a cultural factor of outing is omnipresent. All over Asia, we find categories of people in a heavily bonded and subservient position, who are considered a social estate of its own: the *ngofangare* of Maluku, *alipin* of the Philippines, *nubi* of China. None of these are unproblematic, however, as equivalents of the Western slave term. These and similar categories of people may not always be sellable or subjected to ownership in the Western sense and not necessarily subjected to ‘social death’ as posited by Orlando Patterson in his well-known study.⁹ Scholars such as Suzanne Miers find the conceptual problems so formidable that they discourage the use, or at least unreflecting use, of the thoroughly misused slave term. Rather, one may use local terms for ‘slaves’ and explain how these terms work in the local setting.¹⁰ The matter is not that simple, however. A lack of a viable definition has ethical consequences: if one is content with the statement that a plethora of coerced forms exist in history, it might impede us from taking resolute action against the abuses, considering the widespread prevalence of slave-like forms of labour to this day. The historical existence of countless

⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

¹⁰ Suzanne Miers, ‘Slavery: A Question of Definition’, pp. 1, 11.

coerced labourers in Asian and African settings (and among native Americans and Pacific Islanders) calls for historical comparisons, making a basic definition desirable, if not important. A fundamental feature of coerced/bonded labour might be whether they are allowed to make a choice about the work to be undertaken, although such a criterion seems to imply larger groups than conventional 'slaves'.¹¹ Ownership is often pointed out as a common denominator. The 'slaves' do not own their own bodies and work in a way that sets them apart from the majority of the population. However, 'property-based' definitions of slavery have also come under recent critique, as they attempt to capture a complex social phenomenon using a concept – ownership – that is itself highly ambiguous. What can be owned, how ownership is exercised, who has the right to own, and on what basis – all these questions yield dramatically different answers depending on geographical and historical context. This variability underscores the inadequacy of a universal property criterion when analysing systems of bondage across cultures and time periods.¹² An even less convincing criterion is the lack of personal freedom since there is usually not a 'freedom' concept similar to the Western philosophical and legal term. In some societies the opposite of slavery (and corresponding terms) may not be 'freedom' but rather belonging to an in-group.¹³ The social historian Marcel van der Linden has argued for a broad definition of work that includes directly and indirectly coerced labour since, with reference to Marx, anyone working for a superior is not 'free'. Van der Linden's outline includes a comprehensive set of categories and sub-categories which cover entrance, work, and exit from the system. The forms may appear in different combinations and be contingent on such factors as economy, ideology, legal framework, warfare, international consensus, and degree of resistance. Here it can be hazardous to arrange socially organised form in a continuum – a simplified linear image aggravates efforts to counter abusive practices.¹⁴ We may therefore take broader perspectives in mapping dependency structures in peculiar historical environments and study modalities of domination and dependence through new and innovative methodologies and source curation.¹⁵ The analysis of exploitation of enslaved human resources needs a comprehensive take, as an interactive process that unfolded on a global level in the wake of expanding economic, political, and religious networks.

¹¹ Rönnbäck, 'Free or Enslaved Labor', p. 306.

¹² Lenski, 'Framing the Question: What Is a Slave Society?', p. 43.

¹³ Wimmeler & Wiegink, 'Beyond Slavery and Freedom? An Introduction', p. 4.

¹⁴ Van der Linden, 'Dissecting Coerced Labour', pp. 293–322.

¹⁵ Wimmeler & Wiegink, 'Beyond Slavery and Freedom? An Introduction', p. 2.

3. The roots of slaving institutions

Then why do people become enslaved in the first place? Miller, as mentioned above, has posited slavery as coming out of a multitude context, and hypothesises that the basic phenomenon, ownership over other people's bodies, has roots far back in prehistory, with the development of a functional syntactic language that enabled the definition of in and out groups. Miller emphasised the role of persons in a position of marginality, though not in the way we may expect. Marginality, in his model, means being on the margin of networks of people in control of authority and resources. For them, control over people, or in other words the means of production, helped them to gain wealth and increased prestige. Merchants had a great role in this respect, often working in concert with political authorities.¹⁶ This perspective is very relevant for the slaving that took place in the age of colonial expansion, where the position of the Dutch East India Company (hereafter VOC) in maritime South and Southeast Asia offers an almost archetypical case. European trading companies and traders, while ultimately dependent on European polities, greatly increased their position in Asian lands, initially restricted to coastal trading posts, by acquiring and trading in humans. Adding to that, English country traders were instrumental in developing commerce in maritime Asia, while merchants of what has been termed the Portuguese 'tribe' developed a 'shadow empire' in Asia and eastern Africa during several centuries. In many cases, the enslaved were instrumental in the production of cash crops and maintenance of the European-dominated posts.

More specifically, and still of common interest, is the old theory of Herman Nieboer, developed by Evsey Domar.¹⁷ The Nieboer-Domar hypothesis is that slavery becomes a profitable option when land is available, but labour is scarce or inaccessible. This no doubt speaks to many of the cases discussed in this volume. Large areas of Asia and the Indian Ocean world, which nowadays might be densely populated, were sparsely inhabited until the 19th century or later, or the local populations were not willing to undertake tasks needed for the maintenance of a colonial-style mode of production. The answer to this problem would be slaving, as shown by the slave routes co-opted or initiated by Europeans. However, the Nieboer-Domar hypothesis has not been fully developed into a theoretical economic model, and might underestimate the huge variety of coerced labour.¹⁸ A more recent theory holds that slavery is at heart an economic system, whatever the socio-cultural aspects of it, and that it was the economically most rational way

¹⁶ Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Nieboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System*; Domar, "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom".

¹⁸ Rönnbäck, 'Free or Enslaved Labor', p. 306.

for masters to acquire labour, when the reservation wages (minimum wages) were higher than the cost of labour coercion.¹⁹ This theory might be valid for large-scale early modern modes of production, but will have to be tested against other aspects such as gender, religion, cultural practices, etc. Such questions are especially addressed in the first cluster of chapters which explore such aspects in several geographical contexts: Siberia, South Asia, the East Indies, the Indian Ocean. These demonstrate how a plethora of coerced labour forms were contingent on a complicated entanglement of 'rational' economic logics and culturally tinged factors and traditions.

4. Colonial expansion

In the multitude of variants of coerced labour, colonial expansion had a role from the very start. Colonialism is clearly, like slavery, a much-abused term that is used to characterise a wide range of practices, often with rhetorical aims. Basically, colonialism entails expansion by force (or sometimes invitation) into external lands, for the sake of political, ideological, or economic domination and exploitation.²⁰ Usually, as pointed out in the beginning of this text, the process is accompanied by a downgrading of colonised populations, although this could also change over time and become increasingly aggressive and racialised with the European advances of the 19th and 20th centuries. The term is often used in parallel with imperialism, although the matter is debated, since the latter is more associated with a program of political expansion, whereas the establishment of colonies is mostly tied to economic profit. For example, some current Dutch scholars argue that the Dutch undertaking in the East Indies was colonial but not an expression of imperialism.²¹ Often, of course, they tend to intermingle, since strategic goals, prestige matters, and economic aims are combined in national agendas. What is clear enough is that European domination of Asia was limited for the first few centuries, and mainly confined to North Asia and the Philippines, and several coastal enclaves. Recent economic-historical advances also suggest that the famous 'great divergence' between Europe and Asia began before the onset of serious European impact. The Indian and Chinese GDP per capita, insofar as it can be calculated, declined steadily after 1600 and was much lower than that of England, the Netherlands, and Italy.²²

¹⁹ Rönnbäck, 'Free or Enslaved Labor', p. 330.

²⁰ For a general overview of the problem of colonialism as a historical phenomenon, see MacQueen, *Colonialism*.

²¹ Van den Doel, *Zo ver de wereld strekt*, pp. 131–134.

²² O'Rourke, 'The Economist and Global History', p. 58.

However, European impact accelerated the trends as it initiated a limited global trading system after c. 1580 where Spanish silver from the Americas and the trade in spices had a considerable impact. This was strengthened by the European commercial organisations: the VOC system in the 17th and 18th centuries, the activities of the English EIC in the same period, and a variety of seafaring European nations, all with their coastal strongholds.

How the Portuguese of the 15th and 16th centuries coopted African groups to secure enslaved manpower is well known and studied, but their slaving activities in Asian waters is less familiar and is currently under exploration.²³ Early trading geographies by authors such as Duarte Barbosa (c. 1516) annotated the opportunities for slave trade in Asian coastlands, implying that Iberian seafarers were ready to partake in the opportunities and thus co-opt regional trajectories of slavery. They also took advantage of the possibilities of inter-continental trade, as East African slaves were brought to the Portuguese enclaves in India and sometimes ended up in other corners of Asia. From Portuguese Mozambique, enslaved manpower eventually found its way to even more distant places such as Brazil and the Caribbean. The method of combining European technology of shipping with intervention in existing slave markets was continued by other European groups, such as the Dutch and English East India Companies (VOC and EIC). As the Dutch established a steady grip on parts of maritime Southeast Asia after 1605, they became increasingly dependent on coerced labour. Numerous tasks in the early colonial enclaves could not be filled by free Asian, let alone European labour, and the answer was large-scale allocation of enslaved people. India, plagued by internal conflicts and famines, was a major source of manpower in the 17th century, later largely replaced by Southeast Asian victims of colonial or indigenous conflicts. East Africa played a certain role in the VOC trade, since many slaves from Mozambique were brought to the Cape Colony and war-torn Madagascar was a well-known source of slaves. Reasonable calculations indicate that something between 660,000 and 1,135,000 enslaved persons were brought to the VOC sphere of power during its nearly two centuries of existence.²⁴ Only a minor number were used for plantation work, at first for the profitable nutmeg production of the Banda Islands in Maluku. This has recently been the subject of a study by the well-known author Amitav Ghosh, who uses the bloody Dutch conquest and exploitation of Banda as a point of departure for discussing the long-term ecological effects of Western colonialism.²⁵ Although Ghosh is no historian and derived his material from secondary studies, his effort reminds us of the serious consequences of European profit-driven expansion

²³ Fujitani, 'Government Slavery in Portuguese Melaka, 1511–1523', pp. 141–160.

²⁴ Van Rossum, 'Towards a global perspective on early modern slave trade', p. 50.

²⁵ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*.

where resource extraction and slaving tended to go hand in hand. While slaving had evidently existed in Asia since Antiquity (or longer), the regularity and coordination of Western shipping or land-based expansion after 1500 tended to reinforce or alter existing structures. This can be seen from several chapters in the present volume, such as Angelina Kalashnikova's case about Siberia and Hans Hägerdal's study of Maluku. Even internal Asian initiatives, such as the raiding system of the Sulu slavers of the 18th and 19th centuries, were partly an answer to commercial flows that evolved through European shipping.²⁶

Recent studies of slave trafficking in the Indian Ocean reveal that several European nations were complicit in the business. British, Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Danish traders are known to have traded a half million people or more to the various European posts in the oceanic region in the period 1500–1850 – in other words, persisting with the trade long after the official ban on slave journeys.²⁷ This is reflected in several chapters in the present volume, such as the contribution by Michael Reidy who also highlights the ingeniousness among slavers to circumvent regulations and sometimes collude with European officials to transport their human cargo. It must be stressed that it was seldom a 'purely' European business, since the slaving routes demanded strategic cooperation with Asian and other groups. This could be done in a way similar to the Atlantic slave trade: indigenous populations of maritime Asia or East Africa-Madagascar acquired slaves through warfare, raiding, etc. and sold them to European or European-affiliated merchants who would bring their human cargos to either colonial or indigenous buyers.²⁸ A well-known case is the activities of the Magh raiders of Arakan (Rakhine) which was bound up with the development of the VOC hub in Batavia. From the founding of the city, the Dutch were desperately on the hunt for labour. Labour was however expensive in Southeast Asia, and local Javanese were risky to use. Then, slavery was the answer. Men from Arakan raided populations of the Bay of Bengal in the 17th century in collusion with Portuguese mariners and exported some of the captives to the Dutch.²⁹ There was little compunction among Asian populations to sell their own to European merchants; however, some Indian polities tried to forbid the practice, while religious morality also played a role in the question regarding who could be sold.³⁰ Such scruples were not always efficient, however, as seen by numerous enslaved Muslims delivered to the Christian Dutch over the centuries. Local and European conceptions of slavery

²⁶ Warren, *The Sulu Zone*.

²⁷ Allen, *European Slave Trading*, p. 15.

²⁸ Campbell, 'Environment and Enslavement in Highland Madagascar 1500–1750', pp. 58–62.

²⁹ Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie*, p. 258.

³⁰ Hägerdal, 'Slaving, Colonial Diplomacy, and Resource Extraction in Seventeenth-Century Maritime Asia', pp. 40–42.

blended in a number of ways, especially since early modern colonial territories were contact zones that underwent a process of hybridity. Examples of this process are discussed in Angelina Kalashnikova's chapter about North Asia.

As well established, abolitionism in the Atlantic world became a powerful force towards the late 18th century, leading to the well-known British ban of the slave trade in 1807 and, in the following years, abolition of slavery in the Atlantic region, beginning with the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s and the new Latin American republics in the 1820s. Similar developments happened only later in the Asian colonies. Slavery was abolished in the territories of the English East India Company (hereafter EIC) in 1843, although it was actually outlawed only in 1861.³¹ The Dutch East Indies ended slavery in its directly ruled territories in 1860, and Portuguese Asia followed in 1876. In all these cases, slavery and coerced labour actually persisted longer than that, as seen in the contribution by Priya Kapoor in this volume. Old dependencies and bonded labour relations were not done away with by legal decrees but continued to flourish in a number of forms. Today (2025), it is estimated that more than 40 million people live in slave-like conditions around the world, of which a large part is found in Asian nations.³²

5. New methods of investigation – from databases to anthropology

Almost five centuries of colonialism in Asia has left abundant but underused source materials. While the existence of slavery in European-Asian relations has always been known to a degree in historical textbooks, it has tended to be underplayed, especially in comparison to the Atlantic world. However, the subject has been increasingly explored since the trailblazing works of Anthony Reid and James Warren in the 1980s, and later work on South Asia by Richard Allen, Indrani Chatterjee and Andrea Major.³³ This has entailed research about the statistics of slavery, using the often detailed data about ship movements for the creation of databases. It has also shown the possibilities of the colonial archive to follow the lives of slaves, and even to hear their voices (although under restrained conditions). Moreover, non-archival research by students of anthropology and oral history have deepened our understanding of the collective memory of enslavement and bonded labour.³⁴

³¹ Singh, "Enslaved for Life", 119–142.

³² *Global Slavery Index*, <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/highlights/>

³³ Reid, *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*; Warren, *The Sulu Zone*; Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850*; Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*; Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India 1772–1843*.

³⁴ For an overview of all this, see Allen, 'Slavery, Slave Trading, and Bonded Labor Studies in Asia', 1–29; and Allen's 'Afterword' in this volume.

This volume presents a range of methodological cases in ten chapters. The contributions originate from papers delivered at the conference ‘Colonialism, Slavery and Local Histories in Early Modern Asia’, hosted by the Exploring Slave Trade in Asia (ESTA) network in September 2023. The common denominator is how early colonial establishments were able to co-opt and develop slave trade and coerced labour, roughly from the 16th until the 19th century. The authors ask, from several geographical angles and source categories, how European traditions of slaving (the acquisition and allocation of enslaved) ultimately derived from experience of the Atlantic world, or interacted with societies in the Indian Ocean and Asia to manage slaving routes and coerced labour regimes. Here, the authors combine cutting-edge quantitative methods and digital humanities infrastructures with qualitative archival data. The volume thus explores the possibilities of the colonial archive in conjunction with other types of sources. The volume’s scope means that several Asian regions are not represented by chapters, since they were not formally brought under Western colonial rule, or were only colonised at a rather late stage: Iran, Inner Asia, China, Japan.

A first cluster of chapters explores how colonial structures impacted on coerced labour systems in six geographical areas: Siberia, Sri Lanka, India, Eastern Indonesia, the south-western Indian Ocean, and the geographically scattered Portuguese empire. North Asia has usually been left out of discussions about Asian slaveries, which have tended to focus on the maritime parts of the continent where European trading organisations have provided rich material. However, Angelina Kalashinkova shows in her chapter, ‘Trafficking of Women in 17th-Century Eastern Siberia’, how a close reading of Russian-language sources yields fascinating insights in the encounter between Russian and indigenous Siberian cultures. The chapter explores the enslavement of local Yakut women in Eastern Siberia during the 17th century, shedding light on the methods of enslavement, the pricing of women and their strategies for social advancement. The research significantly broadens the perspective of Asian slave trade scholarship by revealing the issue of women trafficking and interethnic marriages in the region, which were previously beyond the scope of the Asian slavery discourse. The study is based on recently discovered archival materials, allowing for the tracing of biographies of indigenous women who were sold by their relatives to Russian colonisers, captured during military raids, or who sought refuge in Russian settlements.

At the opposite end of Asia, Lodewijk Wagenaar delves into the possibilities of the VOC records to pinpoint coerced labour on an island that was partly or entirely under European dominance for more than 400 years, in his chapter ‘The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Its Use of Company Slaves (Companies lijfeijgenen) in Sri Lanka around 1681’. Focusing on colonial Sri Lanka in the 17th century, he demonstrates the kind of work that the VOC used its Company slaves for, who

were used in addition to other forms of unfree labour. As the chapter highlights, the Company was however also involved in the slave trade, sometimes in indirect ways. Moreover, the Company naturally benefitted from the fact that it facilitated its (poorly paid) staff to provide themselves with unfree domestic workers. All this is analysed through abundant archival materials. The nature of the work performed by Company slaves shows that the Dutch, being socio-economic aliens and occupiers, had no choice but to use forced, especially enslaved labour, to successfully exploit the land and keep other competitors out.

Moving forward in time, Priya Kapoor applies an anthropological long-term perspective on bonded labour in India in her contribution, 'Coolies of Shimla: Modern Slavery as Relic of the British Raj'. The chapter departs from the *baegar* system among agricultural communities in pre-British India in the early 19th century, that gave way to the institutionalisation of coolie labour during British colonialisation, and then modern practices of coolies and Khans, unorganised load bearers. The resilience and transformability of forced or near-forced labour over the centuries, despite the changes of time, is scrutinised. How has the practice changed and endured despite active civil society institutions' advocacy for human rights and equitable labour laws in the country? The study is informed by extant archives, media artefacts, and by conducting ethnographic interviews to understand current labour relations between the employers of commercial businesses and services and the employed. From a varied material, the chapter thus offers an understanding of the long lines of entwinement between coloniality and coerced labour regimes.

Continuing the discussion of the VOC as an Asian actor, Hans Hägerdal explores the activities of the powerful company in a Southeast Asian context in his chapter 'Slavery in the Shadow of the Plantations: Colonial and Indigenous Slaving in Early-modern Maluku'. Here, he studies structures of coerced labour in Maluku, an ethnically very diverse region in eastern Indonesia, and investigates how the local understanding of slavery met and was co-opted by European (in particular Dutch) demands for enslaved manpower in the early-modern era. This is done through a detailed case from 1684, namely the verbose Dutch report of a punitive expedition to the Aru Islands that describes slavery in the colonial-indigenous intersection. Scrutinising the sources about local society, we discern a continuum from an impersonal work-intensive slavery to a personal household-oriented one, even in an area characterised by relative externality and non-hierarchical social relations.

The two following chapters focus on slave trade, and the possibilities to track it down east of the Cape. While comprehensive databases have greatly clarified the Atlantic trade in humans, this is still in the process of development in Indian Ocean and Asian waters. Michael C. Reidy makes a contribution to this in his chapter 'The Case of the *Collector*: Michael Hogan's Illicit Slave Trade at the Cape of Good Hope

in 1800'. This chapter investigates the overlapping of public and private interests in the Indian Ocean slave trade that involved various European, African and Asian actors. Some of this trade went to the Cape. The study makes specific reference to the Collector's privateering voyage financed by British merchant Michael Hogan at the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the 18th century. The study demonstrates the international nature of the organisation of slave trading between the Cape and Mozambique. It also examines the context of European slave trading activity in the Indian Ocean during the Napoleonic Wars and the various strategies merchants employed in the engagement of the slave trade to the Cape during this time.

Filipa Ribeiro da Silva discusses Portuguese slaving from a historiographical and methodological perspective in her contribution 'Reconstructing Iberian Involvement in the Commerce in People around Maritime Asia: Between Challenges and Future Possibilities'. As she observes, Portugal has quite some way to go to come to terms with its history of enslavement, which has tended to drop from the collective memory. The goals of her study are three-fold. Firstly, she presents an overview of the existing scholarship on Portuguese slaving and their main contributions for the study of this topic. Secondly, da Silva discusses the main limitations and gaps in the available literature. Thirdly, she reflects on the main constraints imposed by the source materials, collections and archives. To conclude, she explores some of the methodological challenges faced by researchers working on the study of this topic and puts forward some core ideas in an attempt to draft an agenda for future research.

The second cluster of chapters explores the challenges and possibilities presented by new digital humanities infrastructures, particularly in relation to the archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The authors examine how digital tools and methodologies – ranging from machine-readable sources to named entity recognition and large-scale databases – can transform the study of slavery and forced labour in the Indian Ocean world and across Asia. Together, these contributions reflect on the ethical, methodological, and technical dimensions of the digital turn, while pushing the boundaries of what can be recovered from colonial archives and how global histories of slavery can be more inclusively and accurately written.

Manjusha Kuruppath, Matthias van Rossum, and Mrinalini Luthra contribute with the study 'Revisiting Indian Ocean History in the Face of the Digital Turn'. Their chapter focuses on the GLOBALISE initiative's digitisation of Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives, which will transform the study of colonial history in the Indian Ocean during the 17th and 18th centuries. It introduces machine-readable and contextualised sources that enhance digital historiography with inclusion of non-European perspectives. GLOBALISE addresses historical and technological biases and advocates for a multidisciplinary methodology in the ethical digitisation and analysis of historical data. This work thus not only advances the study

of the Indian Ocean world but also sets a precedent for other archival projects, demonstrating how to confront and mitigate biases to enrich our understanding of diverse global histories.

Continuing the discussion about compiling big data, Daniel Domingues da Silva, Jane Hooper, and Matthew Hopper take a global perspective in their chapter 'Integrating the Indian Ocean and Asian Slave Trades into Global History: Creating Trans-Regional Databases'. As they point out, momentum has been growing in recent years to form a database that would catalogue slaving voyages in the Indian Ocean and Asia. This chapter describes the progress and reflects on the challenges encountered to present. Including the Indian Ocean and Asia on the SlaveVoyages website is crucial to demonstrate the global extent and consequences of transoceanic slave trading. However, one must acknowledge the complexities and challenges involved in doing so. Studies of the Mascarenes and Southern Africa confirm the arrival of enslaved Indians and 'Malays' as well as East Africans and Malagasies in European vessels. These and other examples reveal that to uncover the scale of global slaving one needs to examine how people from all parts of the Indian Ocean were forcibly trafficked across the ocean (and beyond).

Muhammad Asyrafi and Fathiyarizq Mahendra Putra apply cutting-edge methods to elucidate Dutch sources on slavery in 'Identifying and Linking Names, Legal Statuses, and Punishments of The Dutch East India Company Convicts in Early Modern Batavia Using Supervised Named Entity Recognition (NER)'. Under the Dutch East India Company (VOC) colonial law, the most susceptible social group to judicial violence, such as corporal punishment and the death penalty, were slaves and marginalised people. The *Criminele Rollen* is an archival genre created by the VOC that records the information about it, having the potential to reveal the history of convicts, prisoners and death row inmates. The authors envisage methods to uncover the names, legal statuses, and punishments of the slaves, convicts and death row inmates in the *Criminele Rollen* using Named Entity Recognition (NER). Thus, the chapter shows ways to uncover history from below using a digital humanities approach.

Finally, Pascal Konings, Merve Tosun, and Matthias van Rossum discuss the fascinating information that can be obtained by an analysis of materials from a database in 'Shifting the Tide: Data, Findings and Future of the Exploring Slave Trade in Asia Database'. The three authors have been instrumental in processing huge amounts of data about slave trade in the Indian Ocean, in a wide geographical sense. As they explain, the *Exploring Slave Trade in Asia* (ESTA) project aims to remedy the discrepancy between the wealth of existing data and sources that document slave trade in the region, and the lack of resources to make detailed interregional and comparative quantitative analyses. The principles of the database are explained, and the exciting possibilities are highlighted by examples from

places like Malabar, Lampung, and Bali where figures from European trading companies, in the first instance the VOC, show the structures of the slave trade.

The volume concludes with an Afterword by Richard B. Allen, which comments on the ten contributions and sets them in a context of recent advances in slavery studies about Asia and the Indian Ocean. Allen points at the urgent issues that lie ahead, and the need to bring in other disciplines than traditional history, not least archaeology, into the discussion. A section of Allen's text is a critical intervention in the construction of databases that document the movements of enslaved. This is part of an ongoing scholarly debate that is likely to enhance our knowledge of the demography and migrations of coerced labour over the centuries.

The ten contributions and the Afterword give a lively view of the many forms that enslaved labour could take under the dominance of Russian, English, Dutch, and Portuguese masters and merchants. While the sources are primarily European, their abundance and detail provide important clues to the acquisition, social standing, trafficking, and employment of slave labour over four to five centuries of Western expansion. New techniques and methods of analysing the sources point to new and exciting avenues for research on a once largely neglected corner of the world.

