

Connecting Atlantic, Indian Ocean, China Seas, and Pacific Migrations, 1830s to 1930s

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Only recently have historians begun to study the world's oceans and their role in connecting formerly isolated societies. For a long time oceans have rather been regarded as empty spaces between continents and barriers to communication. The approach to migration has also undergone several changes in recent decades. Discussions have moved away from the traditional historical emphasis that isolates continents and nation states toward broader concepts of social space. The conference "Connecting Atlantic, Indian Ocean, China Seas, and Pacific Migrations, 1830s to 1930s" that took place December 6–8, 2007, at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, organized in cooperation with the Immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota, Arizona State University, and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, aimed at bringing together the new interest in maritime history and the history of migration in order to examine oceanic "worlds" as systems or networks of migration.

The conference program was based on the assumption that transoceanic communication and exchange was a major force of globalization, with the intention of broadening perspectives beyond the Atlantic and looking at migrations in different oceanic world regions and on relationships between these migration systems. The conference brought together scholars from all parts of the world and thus offered a true global-history approach from beyond the Atlantic core of knowledge production.

Though the century from the 1830s to the 1930s, when the Great Depression and Second World War in Asia and Europe put a halt to much migration, seems to be an adequate periodization for several seas and migration systems, conference participants agreed that global history must be careful not to impose periodizations that make sense in some regions but not in others. As Adam McKeown (Columbia University) pointed out in his keynote lecture, historians instead have to look closely at how each flow was shaped by its own specific history, regulatory environment, economic opportunities, and power relations, even when processes and cycles of migration grew increasingly integrated across the globe.

Questions of state regulation and the mechanisms of control that influenced the movements of people were recurrent themes of the conference. Mary Blewett (University of Massachusetts, Lowell) focused on shifts between the 1860s and 1920s in markets, capital investment, acquisition of raw materials, and sites of production in the transatlantic worsted trade, and the preceding and ensuing labor migrations. Showing how the McKinley

Tariffs of the 1890s provided effective protection for the huge American domestic market, she argued that the state can be a powerful actor in structuring migration systems.

Other talks pointed to the underlying racial discourses in laws regulating migrations. Erika Lee (University of Minnesota) explored the similarities, simultaneities, and transnationalities of anti-Chinese sentiments, campaigns, and policies in various locales in the Americas and across the Pacific Ocean. Lee considered how Chinese stereotypes circulated across borders and oceans and prompted a global discussion over race and labor. She explored the impact of the racialization of Chinese coolies in Cuba, Peru, and the Greater Caribbean on racial discourses in the United States and how not only stereotypes but also the exclusionary laws they inspired travelled from country to country. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the US in 1882 had a domino effect not only in Australia and New Zealand, but also in Canada, where the anti-Chinese campaign drew much of its rhetoric and organizational strategies from the United States; the 1923 Exclusion Act in Canada closely mirrored US Chinese exclusion laws. The global debates over Chinese immigration, Lee argued, also had far-reaching consequences for other migrant groups since they were invoked to support restrictions on other groups, notably a variety of Asians, Jews, and non-Jews from Eastern Europe, as well as against mass migration of any kind. Xenophobic organizations in England to fight the “alien invasion” explicitly appealed to the 1882 American legislation against the Chinese.

It was emphasized in the discussion that Chinese exclusion laws were part of larger racial discourses about whiteness. Speakers arguing in this vein included Akram Khater (North Carolina State University). Khater examined the multi-layered identities of Syrian migrants to South Africa and the United States and their struggle with ethnic classifications. In characterizing race in terms of religion, Syrian Christians successfully forced the legal system to adjust its definitions and consider them “white Caucasians.” The complexities of outside labelling, self-identification, and political allegiances that shaped the migrant experience was also taken up by Lara Putnam (University of Pittsburgh). She explored how Caribbean Jews went from being routinely categorized as oriental to being routinely categorized as white and presented the Caribbean migratory system as a key site in global debates over migration and the color line in the early twentieth century. Those debates, Putnam noted, reflected expectations about sex as much as expectations about race. In her examination of how debates over race mixture circulated within the complex cultural sphere of the circum-Caribbean migration system through newspapers, letters, pamphlets, and people, Putnam stressed that migrants were not only objects but also subjects of these discussions. Knowledge about sex and race was manufactured not only by journalists, scientists, and politicians, said Putnam, but also by country doctors, angry subletors, and lovesick teens.

Elisabeth Sinn (University of Hong Kong) developed the concept of the “in-between space” as a possible paradigm in the study of migration situations and especially as an alternative approach to focusing solely on sending and

receiving countries. She presented Hong Kong as an “in-between” place on several levels: as a transit and intermediary place for things—money, letters, information, investments, etc.—and an “in-between home” for departing and returning migrants. Overseas migration, she argued, relied on dense and multidirectional networks of people and institutions linking overseas Chinese with their home villages and paving the way for the migrants; charitable societies in Hong Kong supported people in transit, banks and exchange houses administered funds and remittances, and native place associations ensured that the remains of deceased persons were transferred home. The migration trajectory, Sinn pointed out, was seldom a bee-line from point A to point B; in reality there were many detours and delays, diversions and dead ends and what lay in between often shaped the migration experience in profound ways and featured poignantly in the migrants’ mental landscapes. The significance of “in-between” spaces for shaping and transforming migrants’ identities was accentuated in several talks.

In a certain way, as was argued in the discussion, the ocean itself was an “in-between” space. Migrants spent an extended period of time on the ocean in the restricted space of a ship. They had to be organized somehow and they perceived themselves in new identities and new gender roles. Participants agreed that how migration was influenced by the *rite de passage* of sea travel and the conditions on ships needs further investigation.

How the ocean was imagined in different cultures was another point of discussion. As Pamila Gupta (University of the Witwatersrand) pointed out, the sea has played a vibrant role in the life and minds of coastal people around the rim of the Indian Ocean, and, as Putnam demonstrated in her talk, a profound relationship also existed in the Caribbean between the sea and the people.

Whereas in those maritime cultures the sea was seen as a source of livelihood and of food, a route of commerce and communication, a bringer of danger and of opportunity, Carl Trocki (Queensland University of Technology) argued that the concept of the ocean in the Chinese imagination was much more negative. The opportunities oceans could provide were downplayed in the Chinese context, which had to do with the negative view of movement in Confucianism in general but also with imperial political strategies. Whereas migration overland was seen as an expansion of the Chinese empire, going overseas was not considered acceptable, and, until the end of the nineteenth century, was even criminalized. Neither ideology nor legislation stopped people from moving, said Trocki, but both must be taken into account in how we think of movement.

Scholars specializing in different regions of the world have rarely cooperated as closely as in this conference. It thus provided a good example of how historians—though, as one participant noted, they can’t talk about the whole world at once—can work in their provinces of knowledge with a global consciousness. Future research would demand far more exchanges between historians from different parts of the globe, from “cultural macro-regions” rather than from different continents. The conflict between being a specialist in a necessarily limited field and thinking about the very big picture, as the conference concluded, can only be solved in a collaborative effort.