Emigration: Colonial circuits between Europe and Asia in the 19th and early 20th century
by Ulbe Bosma

The emergence of colonial migration circuits between Europe and Asia followed the ascendency of European mercantile and military power. In the early 19th century, the European presence in Asia was still extremely modest and very much involved in intra-Asian migration and trading circuits. From the 1820s onward, commodity production for the European markets took off, both in India and Java, and was accompanied by an increasing military presence. Military veterans contributed to a rapid growth of European colonial settlements decades before the migration of European civilians to Asia became substantial. The early 20th century marked the final phase and the heyday of the colonial migration circuits. In those years, the colonial economies and administrations required many thousands of skilled Europeans. A substantial number of these were children or grandchildren of other Europeans who had made the journey to the East generations before. This circuit was as much a product of Asian-born Europeans, as of metropolitan Europeans. This article focuses on comparisons and connections between British and Dutch migration circuits with Asia.

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Between old and new colonialism, 1780–1840

The 1780s and 1790s marked a transition from the old European mercantile colonialism to the new land-based colonialism (Media Link #ab), a change enabled by Europe’s advancing technological capabilities. Around 1780, the European presence in Asia was mainly maritime in character. Ships under different flags and with crews from a variety of nations, usually a mixture of Europeans and Asians, plied the waters of Southeast Asia in search of precious items and commodities for the European markets. British naval power began to dominate the Asian waters after the fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). Meanwhile, the so-called free merchants began to take over the sea trade from the trading companies in South and East Asian ports as well as in the major coastal cities of Java and further into the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago.¹ These private trading houses maintained a network in which they acted as each other’s local representatives. This network crossed the national and cultural boundaries and involved British, Dutch and Danish traders as well as Parsi and Chinese merchants. The Chinese and South Asian commercial infrastructures were not yet replaced by a European infrastructure, and some parts of these would remain intact during the colonial era.²

The famous Matheson and Jardine trading house, for example, established itself in China in collaboration with the Parsi trader Jamesjee Jejeebhoy (1783–1859) (Media Link #ac).³ Prominent British merchants in Calcutta like William Fairlie (1754–1825) and John Palmer (1767–1836) (Media Link #ad) collaborated with Dutch and Danish agents throughout South and South-East Asia.

Before the early 19th century, Europeans had not yet established control of global commodity production in Asia, with the notable exception of the spice trade of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC). In order to obtain the most lucrative goods for the Europe market – first spices, later tea and China bone – a complete system of intra-Asian trade had been established in which both European and Asian traders played their roles. For the East Indian Company, the sugar and opium trade supported the Canton tea trade, as the intra-Asian trade of the Dutch East Indies Company had supported the trade in spices. Sugar was one of the central commodities because it was widely consumed in China, India, and Persia. The VOC, for example, bought sugar in Bengal to sell it to Japan, while it sold its own sugar produced by Chinese entrepreneurs around Batavia in Surat.⁴
These trade routes began to fade in importance when cash-crop production was transferred from the West Indies and the British expanded their mercantile influence in the Indonesian archipelago, and planters from the West Indies came to India, Malacca (Malaysia) and Indonesia. Sugar and indigo planters came from the Caribbean to Bihar, Bengal and Java from the late 18th century onwards. In addition, the reshuffling of colonial possessions between the French, British, Danish and Dutch during and after the Napoleonic Wars drastically reduced the intensive circulation of Europeans between various colonial possessions. The early-19th-century colonial ambitions of the British and the Dutch were driven by the desire to procure mass commodities such as sugar, indigo, and tobacco for the European markets and to open up the markets of their Asian possessions for their industrial textile production.

However, the European presence in Asia continued to be modest. In the early 19th century, far more British people went to the West Indies than to Asia. European settlements in Asia were almost negligible compared to those in the New World. In British India, they involved at best 3,550 state employees, including naval military personnel, and 2,149 private settlers. These figures do not include wives and children. The equivalent figures for Java amount to about 2,700 state employees and private settlers in 1819. In addition, about 30,000 British military personnel were stationed in British India and 7,000 military personnel of the Dutch colonial army in Indonesia. Another important feature of the first decades of the 19th century was the British presence in colonial Indonesia. Census data and immigration records from Java demonstrate that British trading houses present on Java in the early 19th century continued to play an important role in the development of the local production of tropical goods, and that the emerging plantation economy attracted a modest influx of technicians and employees from various European nations.

Colonial social life in Calcutta, Batavia and also in less prominent colonial locations was characterized by nepotism and opportunism. Though there has been no systematic research into the way in which family relations affected immigration patterns, it is clear that immigration regulations gave Java's European elite, for example, the power to co-opt newcomers and thereby to replenish and sustain itself. As a consequence, the percentage of English, Irish, and Scottish traders on Java, which already constituted about 25 per cent in 1819, probably increased further in the first half of the 19th century. As for the oligarchy of the British East India Company, half of the colonial employees were sons of men who had also served in British India. We do not have comparable figures for the Dutch East Indies but about 50 per cent of the officers were sons of men who had also served in the colonial army. In the early 20th century, probably half of the students passing the exam for the colonial civil service were born in the Dutch East Indies.

Military migration

At any time in the 19th century, the military was the largest segment of the British population in India. In the Dutch East Indies, the situation was slightly different because European settlements there dated from the 17th and 18th century. Moreover, the Dutch recognized their Eurasian offspring as Europeans, whereas, for example, the approximately 11,000 Eurasians who lived in Calcutta in the early 19th century were not counted as Europeans. Both in British India and in the Dutch East Indies, however, the military constituted the overwhelming majority of the newcomers until the late 19th century. In contrast to, for example, French West Africa, the European contingent in the colonial armies stationed in British India and the Dutch East Indies was substantial. The average proportion of Europeans in the 19th century Dutch colonial army was around 35 per cent, or 13,000 men, almost the same percentage as in post-Mutiny British India, where about 60,000 (one-third) of the colonial army was European. The number of British soldiers had almost been doubled in response to the Great Mutiny. Members of this group constituted an important element in European settlement because many of them did not return when their term of service was over. In this regard, the Dutch East Indies are far from exceptional.

In the course of the 19th century, soldiers began to contribute greatly to the growth of the European presence in India and the Dutch East Indies. Because mortality rates were significantly reduced in most tropical environments, the relocation costs (that is, the difference in mortality rates between comparable age groups and social classes in the receiving
country and in the country of departure) were reduced. Mortality rates among Europeans in Java, for example, were still around 200 per 1,000 in 1819, but the figure fell rapidly to under 60 per 1,000 by 1844 and under 40 per 1,000 by the 1850s. That enormously increased the effectiveness of Dutch troop deployments in the colony, particularly compared to the situation in Equatorial Africa, where mortality rates were still above 100 per 1,000 at the end of the 19th century. This became an important factor in the rapid military expansion in the age of imperialism. Great Britain and the Netherlands, for example, were able to intensify their hold on their vast colonial possessions in Asia. They expanded the areas under their control – areas they would surely have lost if they had not been able to recruit fresh troops in Europe and to keep a greater number of them fit for action. But most importantly, military recruitment became the basis for rapidly growing "settler" populations in colonies such as British India and the Dutch East Indies.

The importance of the white colonial military presence increased even further as settlement schemes of white Europeans were mooted. This development occurred comparatively late, however. In the mid-19th century, the idea of establishing white settlements in British India and the Dutch East Indies was still under consideration by the relevant British and Dutch government committees. Railways and regular steamship connections began to make the British and Dutch Asian empires more accessible. The Dutch and British colonial governments became increasingly concerned about the comparatively small white presence in Asia, especially after the Mutiny in British India from 1857 to 1859. The British and Dutch colonial governments each began to increase their military presence in Asia and, in tandem with the rising imperialist ambitions of European countries, the Great Mutiny marked the starting point of what became known as the age of imperialism. In this context, the idea of settlements in Asia, which had not been pursued during the first half of the 19th century, re-emerged and was seriously investigated by the British parliament in 1857 and 1858, as well as by a Dutch government committee under the presidency of a former Governor General of the Dutch East Indies in 1857. British and Dutch government colonization committees eventually proposed to create enclaves in healthy locations. This proposal was based on the idea that Europeans could adapt by a combination of physical acclimatization and by gaining increased control over their environment. After more than three centuries of European presence in tropical regions, this meant a fundamental shift in the discourse about the survival chances of the Caucasian race, which changed from purely medical and climatic arguments to debates about the cultural environments in which European settlers could survive. Increasingly, "white" was considered to mean both "healthy" and "efficient", whereas the tropical environment was increasingly depicted as mentally degrading with physical degeneration as the eventual consequence.

A universal racial taxonomy emerged, which allotted the greatest efficiency to free white labour. Members of the British parliament alluded to the backwardness of agriculture, the devastating effects of the work ethos of slavery and servility, and the need to bring "Saxon energy" to lethargic India. Like their Caribbean and Brazilian counterparts, European publicists in India and the Dutch East Indies increasingly came to believe that the antidote to this supposed lethargy was fresh European blood. The "enclave" was the Asian and African variant of emerging cultural-biological perspectives on white colonial settlements and white purity in tropical environments. Since the European settlements were not expected to grow beyond tiny minorities, the notion of enclaves held great promise to bring in strategic quantities of white men born in Europe to shore up colonial rule and the need to encourage the immigration of strategic quantities of men born in Europe. British advocates of white settlement advanced the argument that a million Europeans in the hills of Darjeeling would be able to provide a military force that could nip any repetition of the Mutiny in the bud.

But none of the suggestions for establishing substantial white settlements in the British and Dutch colonies in Asia ever became concrete plans, let alone being put into action. Of course, the growing colonial infrastructure needed an increasing number of Europeans in key positions, but these were provided by the colonial armies. During the 19th century, rising economic opportunities, the shortening of the term of service, and improving labour conditions in the army made colonial military service more attractive, while the rapid growth of Creole and Eurasian societies made it easier for veterans to find partners. The fact that, in the second half of the 19th century, almost 20 per cent of such veterans became settlers in colonial Indonesia can be explained by the easy absorption of their labour into the emerging infrastructure, booming private enterprise, and a growing number of administrative positions. In 1870, 40 per cent of male European immigrants employed in the Dutch East Indies were ex-servicemen. The same pattern became visible in India, although the railway companies and the Indian government were far more sceptical than their Dutch East Indies counterparts about the suitability of former soldiers and Eurasians as locomotive drivers. Eventually, the Indian government was persuaded by the argument that driving locomotives – involving as it did the controlling of such large steam-powered machines and the responsibility for so many passengers – should remain European work. Thus, the world of steel and steam continued to be the white man's preserve. The military needs of the empire and the idea of "white" labour as crucial for colonial domination combined perfectly.
The army not only provided skilled labour but also produced (together with local women) European offspring, who, at least in the case of the Dutch East Indies, were absorbed into colonial society. (Media Link #ah) Rapidly decreasing mortality rates and a large influx of European military personnel in the decades of colonial wars were responsible for the remarkable growth of the colonial European population throughout the second half of the 19th century. The existence of these populations and military veterans explain why neither the opening of the Suez Canal (Media Link #ai) nor imperialist expansion resulted in a significant increase in white civilian emigration to colonial Indonesia in the late 19th century. Instead, the passage of European migrants through the Suez Canal was in a north-bound direction, as often as it was south-bound. To recognize the importance of circular migrations, we must also revisit some of the markers of colonial history, such as the mentioned opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The importance of this event and its relationship to colonialism are multidimensional. For the Dutch East Indies – and probably British India – it accelerated and broadened an already existing Creole settlement and migration circuit but, apart from the military, did not immediately attract large groups of metropolitan newcomers.

Clearly, the presence of European soldiers was crucial to the demographic growth of European colonial societies in Asia, but this development was accompanied by uneasiness about its Asian-female and European-military components. These colonial societies were characterised by considerable tensions and debates regarding race, sexual morality, and cultural competence. At the same time, colonial authorities became increasingly reliant on people of mixed European-Asian progeny. It was in the best interests of colonial rule to include them in the colonial apparatus and to assign them a modest but privileged place within the racial hierarchy. Thus, in the British and Dutch Asian colonies (The Straits, Ceylon, India, and the Dutch East Indies), Eurasian populations were growing rapidly. (Media Link #aj)

The migration circuit during high imperialism

The conditions were gradually created in which European societies in Asia became self-sustaining. In the 19th century, they began to absorb groups which had resulted from centuries of colonialism – European descendants and peripheral groups of Christians in India and Indonesia – and to catch up with the Anglo-Indian and Dutch Creole populations. Whereas governments in the western hemisphere, South Africa and Algeria sponsored white labour immigration, the authorities in the British and Dutch colonies in Asia created patterns of social mobility that strengthened the European presence without importing large quantities of white labour. Only the most senior levels of the colonial economy and bureaucracy needed to be occupied by expatriates. Colonial migration circuits, which could easily be sustained after the opening of the Suez Canal, created a class of Europeans who were thoroughly committed to the imperial cause. Although the emergence of the nationalist movement in the early 20th century made the existence of a privileged class of "native-born Europeans" problematic, strategic colonial interests delayed the process of abolishing their privileged position, and colonial governments had a strong interest in maintaining a society of European descendants. Thus, the emergence of nationalism did not change – but rather reinforced – the colonizer's strategic interest in maintaining such a population.

As a concomitant of this strategic interest, large migration circuits of Europeans developed between Great Britain, the Netherlands and their respective Asian colonies. Also, Asian-born parents sent their children to be educated in Europe and began to travel increasingly between the colony and the metropole. Since many of these Creoles – possibly even the majority – were descended from an Asian mother or grandmother, the migration circuits are important for understanding how lines of (racial) distinction were drawn between colonial rulers and indigenous subjects. The central driving force behind this circular migration in the case the British Raj and of the Dutch East Indies was the fact that metropolitan education rather than metropolitan birth was pivotal in maintaining European colonial boundaries.

The metropolitan pattern of sending children away to be educated became the norm among the elite families in Dutch East Indies society, who were largely civil servants. Some of these families had been employed in these capacities for several generations, first by the Dutch East Indies Company and later by the Dutch East Indies government. The civil servants and their wives produced offspring during their active years in Asia and then, in particular the staff in the upper echelons, sent their children to Europe, sometimes when they were only four years old. These children then returned to
Asia, and their parents resettled in Europe after their retirement. These so-called "empire families" managed to stay on the European side of the colonial boundaries, even if they were Asian or part Asian, because they were members of the imperial migration circuit.\textsuperscript{26} In Java, Creole planters became part of this circuit in the 1860s when the first generation of pioneers had grown old and left the management of their estates to their sons or daughters and sons-in-law. Although employment for Europeans in the plantation economy and colonial bureaucracy developed slowly, from the perspective of the colonial government it was sufficient to produce an elite that was either entitled to paid leave or was affluent enough to travel to the Netherlands more than once in a lifetime.

As early as 1849, a few hundred East Indies men were at school, on leave, or in retirement in the Netherlands, and the women joined their husbands. Later, an increasing number of women born in the East Indies also went to school in Europe, a practise that had been usual among the highest circles of colonial civil servants in the 18th century. After the opening of the Suez Canal in the 1870s, the number of women in this group began to exceed the number of men. In 1849, 13.7 per cent (1,493) of East Indies-born males and 13 per cent (1,391) of females lived in the Netherlands, and it is very likely that some who lived elsewhere in Europe were not included in these figures. For 1879 the percentages are, respectively, 19 per cent and 20 per cent, which provides evidence of an impressive mobility.\textsuperscript{27} Both in the Netherlands and in Great Britain, enclaves of (former) colonial civil servants and other retirees came into being. For those who were looking for tranquillity, there were the spa-towns in Southwest England, or the pleasant surroundings of the gentle hills of Arnhem in the eastern part of the Netherlands. For those who wanted to stay engaged in colonial affairs, The Hague, the centre of government, was the place to be. After decolonisation, this town was dubbed the "widow of the Indies", whereas in England the London district of Bayswater was nicknamed "Asia Minor". The ranks of the European repatriates were strengthened by hundreds of Indian students (Media Link #ak) who made the trip to England from the late 19th century onwards, and a few dozen Indonesian students who came to the Netherlands in the early 20th century.\textsuperscript{28}

This mobility further increased in the 20th century. However, migration to the metropole came to outweigh migration from the Netherlands to its colony, which had negative inward migration most of the time. The passage of migrants through the Suez Canal was predominantly from south to north. Net female emigration from the Netherlands to the East Indies was even consistently negative up to World War I, which can be explained by the fact that successful European bachelors often married women born in the Indies, and then returned to Europe with their wives when they retired. There is also a sharp contrast between the even slope of female migration and the sharp peaks of male migration before 1914. These occurred largely because, prior to World War I, young men without a solid position usually went to the East Indies as bachelors. The volatility of the East Indies plantation economy resulted in sharp peaks in immigration figures for males. In contrast, female migration developed fluidly and in line with the growth of the colonial elite, which up to 1910 was less affected by changing economic circumstances. Thereafter, female migration became part of general economic and political cycles. This accounts for the periods of positive net female migration in the 1920s and 1930s. Male migration followed the patterns of heavy military recruitment and economic booms, particularly the booms of the 1890s, the years just before World War I and the late 1920s.

The troughs in this pattern were shaped by economic crises such as in 1922 and the Great Depression, which caused many of the expatriates to return home immediately. In this respect the 20th century can be compared to the 19th century, when migration was determined by the needs of the East Indies labour market. A new feature was the increasing integration of the Dutch and East Indies labour markets for highly skilled and technical labour since the impediments of high travel costs and high mortality rates were drastically reduced. From 1910 onward, the East Indies usually offered considerably higher salaries than Europe, and therefore began to attract new categories of (highly) skilled immigrants.\textsuperscript{29} Deteriorating economic prospects in the 1920s and 1930s drove many young families to the East Indies, which accounts for the rapid resumption of emigration to the East Indies in the early years of the Great Depression. It reached an all-time high in 1936 and continued for several years.\textsuperscript{30}

Unfortunately, quantitative data about the migration circuit between Britain and India is far less detailed than the statistics for the Netherlands, but there is no reason to assume that this Britain-India imperial migration circuit was less intense than the Dutch one.
The sea journeys, still dangerous and uncomfortable in the 19th century, became highlights in the 20th century. The shipping companies created their own versions of colonial lifestyles on board. The predecessor of the modern cruise ship is the metropolitan-colonial steam liner. The enchanting, nostalgic advertising posters of the shipping companies, like those of the Lloyd shipping company, derive their appeal from a mixture of European art deco and oriental motifs. Here East meets West. The ocean steamers acted as sites where the interstitial identities of the British and Dutch empire families could come into their own. These families were neither fully rooted in the colonies nor in the metropole. They were only fully at home on board and among similar families somewhere between Surabaya, Singapore, Colombo, Bombay, Suez and Genoa.

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Appendix

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Notes

2. ^ In this context, Webster is referring to how John Palmer was able to tap the Indian financial resources. Webster, The Richest East India Merchant 2007, p. 21.
14. ^ Peter James Marshall and David Arnold have emphasized the significant proportion of military veterans in European (civilian) settlements in British India. Graham Dominy demonstrated the same for Natal, while Manuel Moreno Fraginals and José Joaquín Moreno Masó found a large “residue” of Spanish military men who neither returned to Spain nor died, but found a place in Cuban Creole society. Arnold, White Colonization 1983; Marshall, British Migration 1992; Fraginals / Masó, Guerra, Migración y Muerte 1993, pp. 101, 136; Dominy, The Making 1997.
27. Ibid., p. 197.

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Link #ab

Link #ac

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Officer of the K.N.I.L. 1849
Link #ag


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- [First vessels through the Suez Canal 1869](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/first-vessels-through-the-suez-canal-1869?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500)

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Passenger ship leaving the Dutch East Indies c. 1920–1938