

Book Reviews

DIEGO JAVIER LUIS, *The First Asians in the Americas: A Transpacific History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024. 368 pages, €40.95. ISBN 978-0-67427-1784

The First Asians in the Americas offers a meticulous exploration of the history of Asians who crossed the Pacific Ocean to the Spanish Americas, primarily aboard galleon ships running from Cavite in the Philippines to Acapulco in Mexico between the late sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book traces the diverse paths taken by these individuals, who ventured into the interior of the Americas and beyond. These Asians were mainly enslaved people, along with a smaller number of free migrants, originating from the Philippines, India, Japan, China and other parts of Asia. During the Spanish-Portuguese Union (1580–1640), Spain had access to Portugal’s existing slave network, resulting in the transport of slaves from various parts of Asia to Mexico via the Philippines.

By focusing on the movements of these people, the author seeks to address gaps in previous research from three key perspectives. First, the book contributes to the study of colonial Latin American history, where the mobility of Asians from the Pacific side has been underexplored compared to the interaction with voyagers from the Atlantic side. Second, the book reshapes the history of Asian migrants in the Americas, which conventionally begins in the nineteenth century. The author positions the experiences of Asians who crossed the Pacific in the early modern period as a significant part of the broader narrative of the Asian diaspora in the Americas, rather than treating these experiences as a minor aspect within the history of the Spanish Empire. Third, the book provides a more nuanced understanding of how Spanish colonial authorities racialised Asians in the Americas, along with the varied responses of Asians to this racialisation. This is discussed particularly in relation to the fact that, in colonial Mexico, Europeans classified Asians into a single category, “chino/a”, regardless of the Asians’ ethnolinguistic differences.

The book is an expansion of the author’s recent research, seemingly developed from his 2020 doctoral thesis submitted to Brown University, titled “The Pacific Meets the Atlantic: How Early Modern Asian Mobility Transformed the Americas”. Across its six chapters, the volume consistently focuses on human experiences, tracing journeys across various spaces.

Chapter 1 begins with the social tensions in the Philippines during the early seventeenth century, which led some Philippine natives and other Asians to

board galleon ships headed for Mexico. In Chapter 2, the author delves into the experiences of Asians on these ships, examining shared spaces of labour, religious practices and the formation of a unified community. Chapters 3 and 4 explore how free Asian migrants and enslaved individuals moved inland from Acapulco to central Mexico, employing negotiation techniques to improve their living conditions. These two chapters, based on previously published articles, showcase the depth and rigour of the author's scholarship. The narrative then broadens in Chapter 5 to encompass those who ventured beyond central Mexico to California, Oregon, Guatemala, Lima and even the Iberian Peninsula, highlighting regional differences in the racialisation of Asians. Finally, Chapter 6 reveals that, during the eighteenth century, Asians in colonial Mexico, whose actual circumstances remained largely unknown, continued to navigate their lives by employing strategies passed down from earlier generations. The author's commitment to presenting history from a bottom-up perspective through the lens of global microhistory is evident – and I genuinely admire this approach, which offers a stark contrast to traditional top-down narratives.

One of the book's most notable achievements is its emphasis on the agency exercised by Asians in response to the circumstances they faced, challenging the predominant view that global social structures shaped their experiences. The author portrays even enslaved individuals not just as passive figures but as active agents employing survival strategies. This perspective is reinforced by meticulous historical research and a thorough examination of diverse sources, including Inquisition records and wills from Spain, Mexico, the United States and the Philippines. This thoughtful assembly of evidence effectively illuminates the lives of individuals from centuries past, vividly bringing their stories to life.

Regarding the book's second key perspective – the history of the Asian diaspora in Americas – there is potential for further exploration of how the experiences of the Asian individuals discussed relate to the broader history of the Asian diaspora in the Americas since the nineteenth century. The author suggests that the arrival of Asians in the early modern period initiated a process of racialisation that later justified the use of Chinese and South Asian indentured labourers in the Americas in the nineteenth century (p. 230). However, I believe a more concrete explanation of how this process unfolded, with a particular focus on the nineteenth century, would have been beneficial. Addressing this aspect could deepen our understanding of how the history of Asians who crossed the Pacific in the early modern period contributes to the larger narrative of the Asian diaspora in the Americas.

Moreover, in relation to the third key perspective, on racialisation, a more detailed explanation of how issues of racial and hierarchical inequalities intersect would be helpful. From the examples the author provides, the concept of "chino/a" appears to overlap with other labels, intersecting with racial categories like "indio/a" and hierarchical conditions such as "enslaved", which com-

plicated the experiences of Asians in the Americas. For instance, in Chapters 2 and 4, the lives of Asian slaves seem to be shaped more by their condition of enslavement than by their place of origin. I would appreciate further insights into how the divisions created by slavery affected the formation of the racial categories. Nevertheless, book offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of the lived experiences of Asians who crossed the Pacific in the early modern period. Readers interested in slavery, immigration and racial formation – both historically and in contemporary contexts – will undoubtedly find this work enlightening and thought-provoking.

Kaori Mizukami

SUKHADEO THORAT / S. MADHESWARAN / B. P. VANI, *Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment Discrimination and Its Impact on Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 340 pages, \$120.00. ISBN 978-0-1988-7225-2

The role of social identities in influencing occupational choice has been the subject of research worldwide. In Western labour markets, contributors to the edited volume by Anthony Heath and Sin Yi Cheung¹ have demonstrated that most second (and later) generations of ethnic minorities (of non-European descent) experience “ethnic penalties”. That is, ethnic minorities suffer a disadvantage in terms of social networks, which subsequently contributes to their inability to secure salaried employment. Such an account has been lacking in the Indian context, which is widely known for its historical social inequality based on the caste system. The book under review, *Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment, Discrimination and its Impact on Poverty*, is a timely intervention. It engages in theoretical debates on discrimination with academic rigour and intellectual depth and examines macro-level empirical trends in India, with a particular focus on the scheduled castes (SCs) or untouchables vis-à-vis the upper castes. Moreover, as the authors themselves note, this is probably the first study to estimate “the impact of employment and wage discrimination on the income and poverty of the SCs” (p. 271).

In its eleven comprehensive chapters, the book provides a thorough theoretical and empirical examination of discriminatory practices in the labour market and their impact on employment, wages, occupational choice and poverty. The two chapters that follow the introductory chapter provide a detailed review of the

1 Anthony Heath / Sin Yi Cheung: The Comparative Study of Ethnic Minority Disadvantage. In: Anthony Heath / Sin Yi Cheung / S. N. Smith / B. Academy (eds): *Unequal Chances: Ethnic Minorities in Western Labour Markets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 1–44.