

## **Asians in Europe: Global Labour Migration and Transnational Communities**

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What did and do we understand under the term „Asians“ when we are talking about „Asians in Europe“? With this terminological question raised by the keynote speaker DIRK HOERDER (Arizona) the International Conference „Asians in Europe: Global Labour Migration and Transnational Communities“ was opened on 14th September 2009 in the University of Salzburg. Historians, anthropologists and sociologists gathered to rethink the current research on Asian migration to Europe. By reflecting on the linguistically and geographically oriented term „Asians“, the conference was aimed to offer a historically differentiated view into the world of the highly mobile and transnational Asian labour migrants on the one hand and an interdisciplinary investigation of a new paradigm, as Hoerder emphasized, „for the present with options and openness for the future“ on the other.

In the opening speech, Hoerder briefly reviewed the state of the research in regards to the global history of „labour migration system“ with comparative aspects, in which he criticized the designation of migrants by continents and argued for a transnational migration system at global, national and local levels with acknowledging the complex backgrounds of Asian labour migrants. He reminded the audience how arbitrarily and fiercely the „ethnic labels“ can obscure our understanding of the „image of migrants“. Drawing more attention to internal differentiation in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, as well as chronology, Hoerder suggested that future research should take into account complexities of migration and their diverse interactions in particular historical, political, commercial, intellectual and cultural contexts with different empirical examples.

By presenting a very particular German

art of „Völkerschau“ of the 19th century, WERNER SCHWARZ (Vienna) illustrated how the western perception of the „Asians“ evolved in the course of interaction of the „Selves“ with the exotic „Others“. Despite the diverse and complex discourses with regard to these performing „Asians“ in terms of scientific research, educational values as well as entertainment, Schwarz argued that this special form of representation did not create new „images of the Asians“, but popularized the perception of the exotic „Asians“ in western society, which was closely associated with „colonization“ and „racism“.

Not only cultural but also economic factors play a crucial role in the issue of global labour migration. Two historical case studies of Chinese sailors in Rotterdam and Hamburg between 1895 and 1950, as developed by LARS AMENDA (Osnabrück), illustrated the fact that historical development of the Chinese migration in continental Europe started with maritime labour in the late 19th century. Amenda also pointed out the close connection between the history of the Chinese migration and the history of the imagination in the western world. By examining the phenomenon that „the Chinese“ in the age of European maritime industry were colonially received and imagined as „docile and apolitical coolies“, as the „yellow peril“ or as „ridiculed, feminized and entrepreneurial laundry men“, Amenda emphasized the need to ask question on how this spatial, economic and ethnic concentration of Chinese sailors in several European port cities enhanced this narrow perception and imagination in the particular local context.

Another example of European local reaction toward the Chinese sailors was presented by JOHN SEED (Roehampton) in his study of London's Chinatown from 1900 to 1940. Bearing the fact that there was no territorially distinct and ethnically homogenous „Chinatown“ in Limehouse by the 1920s in London, Seed traced how these riverside streets with their small Chinese settlements became such a focus of (inter)national public attention. Additionally, he demonstrated how the imagined „Chinatown“ was transformed by British journalists and magistrates into a broader space for the interplay of sexuality, crimes and

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drugs. It was also intersected with fears and frustration of local people about unemployment, low wages and housing shortage. „Chinatown“ suddenly, as Seed addressed, turned into the most exciting and dangerous „places“ in newspapers, novels and movies, or even in official census data.

Moving from the past to the present, BRUCE LEIMSIDOR (Venice) brought the recent development of Afghan migration into Europe to the agenda. In his paper, Leimsidor pointed out the difficulties in understanding this specific migration from a European perspective. Through his long-time study on the Afghan migrants, Leimsidor argued that the obstacle to fit the Afghan migration in the established European legal, political, and intellectual systems lies essentially on the diversity and complexity of the Afghan migration into Europe, which are featured by the highly interwoven flows of legal and illegal migrants, mixed population of minors and adults, as well as entangled identities in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and tribal belongings. By addressing the problem, Leimsidor urged to develop apposite methodological and strategic approaches to cope with these complex phenomena of Afghan migration into Europe.

Against the backdrop of transnationalism GERTRUD HÜWELMEIER (Berlin) emphasized the need to investigate the migration movement and its multilateral national contexts in people's economic, political and social activities without neglecting the significance of border regimes and state policies in controlling and regulating the movement. In her study about the transnational Vietnamese in Germany after 1950, she examined specifically the economic activities of transnational Vietnamese, which were not only restricted by the working and migration conditions in Germany, but also were deeply involved in the political affairs, local economic market and family structure in Vietnam. The transnational migration, as Hüwelmeier argued, was essentially located in a highly interwoven complexity which extended between the institutional control of the migrants on the one hand and the individual ability in creating opportunities in a foreign society as well as in home communities on the other.

In his presentation on the Indian migrants in Austria, BERNHARD FUCHS (Vienna) highly acknowledged the diversity of the Indians living in Austria in terms of occupations, castes and religions as well as lifestyles, which is to a great degree impacted by the complexities rooted inside India and its transnational diasporas. He argued that, despite the popularizing Indian cultural elements in publicity, such as Bollywood movies, Yoga, and Indian food, the real image of the Indian community remains vague and mostly simplified in public perception. Such ambivalence, as he argued, is likely to cause unexpected imaginary of the community in the host society, for instance, the case of Ravidassia Temple incident in Vienna, which created a strong image of the Indian associated with terrorism. Unlike the Indian, TERESA BURIAN (Salzburg) depicted a relative positive image of the Philippines in Austria. Beginning with the women labour immigration in the 1970s, the Philippine community in Austria has developed into a hybrid group with people of various migration backgrounds and of complex citizenships, which, as Burian argued, raised difficulties in defining them with current category system. Also, Burian emphasized the obstacle in analyzing the Philippines with applying the conventional nation-state paradigm due to the transnational feature of this group.

The comparative case studies conducted by THOMAS HERDIN (Salzburg) on the „openness to the world“ of the Chinese in Shanghai and Beijing today and the cultural experience of a group of Chinese exchange students in Austria, illustrated a very contradictory conclusion about the imaginary and the real perception as regards to global migration. Herdin argued that such contradiction is to a great extent shaped by the simplification and generalization of migration experience, which is usually connected to „stereotype“, „racism“ and „discrimination“.

The common awareness of the complexity and diversity of the Asians in Europe gave rise to an extensive and vibrant discussion on preferred theoretical as well as methodological shifts in order to cope with these complex phenomena of Asian migration into Europe. Existing terminologies such

as „cosmopolitanism“, „transculturality“ and „transnationalism“ were critically discussed by the participants. While it was questioned whether the term „transnationalism“ stresses too much the role of „nation“ or „state“ and its regulations of the ethnic groups, „cosmopolitanism“ and „transculturality“ were also conformed to their weak links to border controls as well as (bio)political, economic and social power structure behind „going global“. Further work has to be conducted with more attention to the heterogeneous facets of the Asian migration in a global context.

**Conference overview:**

*Key Note Speech*

Dirk Hoerder (Arizona/USA), Global Labour Migration and Transnational Communities

*Asians in European Eyes*

Werner Schwarz (Vienna/Austria), Asians in the „Völkerschauen“ of the 19th Century

*Trade – Harbour – Cities 1900-1950*

Lars Amenda (Osnabrück/Germany), Maritime Labour and Chinese Migration in Continental Europe, 1890-1950

John Seed (Roehampton/UK), Chinatown and the London Docks 1900-1940

*Asian Labour Migrants in Europe 1950-2009*

Bruce Leimsidor (Venice/Italy), Migrations from Afghanistan in Italy

Gertrud Hüwelmeier (Berlin/Germany), Transnational Vietnamese in Germany

Bernhard Fuchs (Vienna/Austria), Migrants from India in Austria

Teresa Burian (Salzburg/Austria), Filipinos and Filipinas in Austria

Thomas Herdin (Salzburg/Austria), China: Going Global

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