Book review


Gregor Benton’s book provides an extensive account of Chinese indentured labour in the Dutch East Indies (DEI) from 1880 to 1942. Notably, during this period, the movement of indentured Europeans to North America had long ceased, and the reliance on Indian indentured labour in the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic regions was waning, particularly after 1920. In the age of migratory semi-free labour, Chinese indentured labour continued well into the twentieth century and was instrumental in sustaining the capitalist economy in the DEI. Without it, the ‘Dutch would never have achieved global prominence in tin, tobacco and cash crops’ (p. 6). The aforesaid contention, coupled with the argument that Chinese indenture was not monochromic, is the main thesis of the book.

The focus is typical of the study of indenture. Thousands of labourers were pushed out of China because of bad political policies, economic deprivation, and unemployment and pulled to the islands of Bangka, Belting, and Deli in the DEI because of a labour shortage and better life opportunities for the migrant labourers. The labourers’ experience in the mines and on the plantations are analyzed as well as their options and personal desires to stay or leave when their contractual obligations expired. The approach reinforces that the Chinese indentured experience was not one-dimensional but multifaceted and complex. The native homeland bases of the migrants were linked with foreign lands, making their sojourning experience somewhat comfortable as if they had never left China. Over time, the

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labourers became beneficiaries of indenture and contributed to nation-building in their new homeland as well as in China. Benton posits that his book offers ‘a new perspective on the center-periphery debate and the mobilization of indentured labor by industrial and agricultural capitalism to plant and mine in tropical colonies’ (p. 9). Using an array of original and secondary sources in many languages of the region, Benton has produced a detailed account of almost every nodal stage of the Chinese indentured experience: a lack of protection of labourers from the state, deception in the recruitment process, abuse, coercion, inadequate health care, poor working and living conditions, social inequality, and penal sanctions, amid some bouts of militancy and resistance from the bound labourers.

Benton goes further, however, and argues against the homogenizing but evolving process of Chinese indenture in the DEI. Criticism forced the Dutch to loosen their grip on Chinese indenture, which allowed the labourers to find new pathways of personal and community development in and beyond their indentured zones. The destruction of culture, self-reliance, resourcefulness, and resilience, the loss of languages, stern segregation, and the lack of opportunity for mobility and urbanization were far less prevalent in the Chinese indentured domains of the DEI than in others of the Caribbean and Latin America (pp. 320–335). Benton noted the changing dynamics of Chinese involvement in the workforce – from workers in the mines and on the plantations to traders and factory workers. Eventually, they had the ability to send remittances back home. ‘The remittances that flowed north helped rescue and transform the economy of south China’ (p. 331). These findings reinforce Benton’s argument in the introduction that Chinese indenture was not ‘one-sided’, and the Chinese had the ability ‘to stand up for themselves’ (p. 334). While some may think this declaration represents a glorification of Chinese indenture in the DEI, the strength of the book lies not only in Benton revealing the negative aspects of indenture but also how the
indentured Chinese used their space to navigate the contours of their new destinations after they renewed and served out their contracts in a conflict-habituated colonial environment. Benton’s argument is in tandem with the labouring class’s dictum of creating opportunities out of adversity.

The book is not without flaws. Over 200 pages (pp. 345–570) are offered in the appendix and one wonders why these notes were not weaved into the main narrative. The statistics of the population movement of the indentured Chinese are carelessly presented, scattered all over the text. A few tables on ethnicity, time frame and numbers would have made reading less cumbersome. While the few photographs are welcome, a few maps of the sending and receiving destinations would have been helpful. Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book makes a remarkable contribution to the field of indenture research, revealing that Chinese indenture in the DEI was a variegated labour practice in terms of recruitment, organization and employment. The book deserves a place in the indenture historiography and will be of enormous interest to students and researchers in the field of global labour history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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