

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

---

6-2020

### Departing from Java: Javanese labour, migration and diaspora

Andy Scott CHANG

Singapore Management University, andyschang@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research)



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

CHANG, Andy Scott.(2020). Departing from Java: Javanese labour, migration and diaspora. *Pacific Affairs*, 93(2), 478-481.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research/3474](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3474)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylids@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylids@smu.edu.sg).

# DEPARTING FROM JAVA: Javanese Labour, Migration and Diaspora | Edited by Rosemarijn Hoefte and Peter Meel

*NIAS Studies in Asian Topics. no. 66. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2018. xiii, 288 pp. (Tables, graph, B&W photos, illustrations.) US\$29.00, paper. ISBN 978-87-7694-246-5.*

Book review published in *Pacific Affairs*, 2020, 93 (2). <https://pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/book-reviews/departing-from-java-javanese-labour-migration-and-diaspora-edited-by-rosemarijn-hoefte-and-peter-meel/>

Under globalization, guest worker programs are increasingly touted as a “win-win” solution for regularizing cross-border mobility. While such temporary migration schemes enable destination states to procure a flexible labour pool, they are said to benefit origin states through skill and remittance transfers. The Indonesian state, nonetheless, is often perceived as bereft of the capacity to harness labour export for development.

*Departing from Java* complicates this narrative of administrative failure by analyzing diaspora through the prisms of empire, state-building, and feminism. Placing migration in contexts that are local and global, imperial and postcolonial, and authoritarian and democratic, the edited volume examines diasporic formations from Java—Indonesia’s and the world’s most populous island—that span epochs, generations, and localities. As such, *Departing from Java* provides a comprehensive account of Javanese migration in its colonial and contemporary configurations.

The book is unique for adopting a subnational unit of analysis through the lens of Java, an entity with “strong socio-cultural, socio-economic, spiritual and territorial connotations” that has historically molded Javanese identities (2). Indonesia scholars have long noted the itinerant traditions of minority ethnic groups such as the Acehnese and Minangkabau. The book, however, makes an important contribution by featuring the Javanese as prominent participants in state-managed migration schemes. Since the colonial times, rural Javanese have been inserted into an array of labour regimes, from spontaneous and irregular migration to indentured servitude and transmigration—an Indonesian government initiative for relocating Java’s surplus labour to the Outer Islands. The book’s central aim, then, is to interrogate the experiences of Javanese émigrés of varied gender and class positions, exploring how elected officials, bureaucrats, agricultural labourers, factory operators, and domestic workers navigate the diverse sociopolitical circumstances mediating their journeys.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first two chapters analyze Javanese transmigration. Rebecca Elmhirst highlights the role of the state as an architect of transmigration, probing how successive administrations deployed the program to serve their political needs. Through land allotments and replication of Javanese administrative, customary, and agrarian practices in enclave communities, Dutch colonists utilized transmigration as a safety valve for Java’s poor. The New Order regime, by contrast, redefined transmigration as a catalyst for national development. Taking an ethnographic approach, Agus Suwignyo and Widaratih Kamiso examine how street-level bureaucrats crafted institutions *de novo*, from organizing land-clearing missions to building transit homes and schools, that proved vital for cementing a transmigrant society. The consolidation of this infrastructure, in turn, permitted these pioneering bureaucrats to accumulate capital through land acquisition and nonfarm business ventures, encouraging their permanent settlement in southeast Sulawesi.

The rest of the book examines Javanese migration to established and emerging international destinations. Three chapters historicize Javanese migration to New Caledonia, Malaysia, and Suriname. In an important chapter, Amarjit Kaur suggests that Javanese indentured labourers were integrated as Malays during the colonial era, not only because of their shared religious traditions, but also because it facilitated British “divide-and-rule” tactics in multi-ethnic Malaya. However, with postcolonial Malaysia’s shift to an export-oriented development model, the influx of undocumented Javanese migrants has led the public to clamour for their exclusion, resulting in recurring deportation campaigns. By demonstrating Malaysia’s

contradictory experiments with Javanese incorporation, Kaur thus underlines the politically contested nature of ethnic boundaries. Peter Meel's chapter delves into the understudied case of Javanese immigrants in Suriname, showing how their successful integration is attributable, in part, to their mobilization by Javanese political parties.

The remaining four chapters focus on Javanese guest workers. The authors stress how the transnational brokerage system, coupled with racial and gender stereotypes, operate to marginalize Javanese women migrant domestics in Asia and the Middle East. Wayne Palmer and Robert Tierney investigate the construction of guest worker hierarchies in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. Rachel Silvey and Nurchayati, by contrast, examine how Saudi Arabia's immigration policies and patriarchal ideology constrain Javanese housemaids' social freedoms. These challenges notwithstanding, Nurchayati argues that Javanese migrant domestics manage to ameliorate their subordination by clinging to village religious customs, forging migrant networks, and devising strategies of resistance against difficult employers. Refuting the notion that migrant domestics are powerless, Nurchayati finds that Javanese housemaids experience empowerment, as reflected in their growing decision-making authority in origin households.

Overall, *Departing from Java* is impressive for meticulously documenting the legacies of European conquest and nation building on diasporic subjectivities. However, a more systematic treatment of citizenship, race, and diaspora could strengthen its theoretical contributions and offer fruitful opportunities for cross-chapter comparison. Besides needing a formal conclusion, the contributors might theorize how the context of reception—comprised of government policies, labour market conditions, and immigrant community resources in the destination country—affects the modalities of Javanese identity formation across time and space. The reviewer is particularly interested in understanding how citizenship, race, gender, and class intersects with host society institutions to structure Javanese migrants' agency. For example, one might argue that a favourable context of reception has allowed Javanese transmigrants to enjoy a level of autonomy not available to international migrants. That Javanese are part of a dominant ethnic group sponsored by the Indonesian government may explain why they occupy a relatively privileged position in transmigrant communities. Moreover, as Indonesian citizens, transmigrants possess a range of social resources, from access to land and housing to education, family reunification, and political representation, that guest workers do not. In fact, as some contributors have pointed out, the latter are prone to encounter racial and class discrimination, along with social control by host governments, brokers, and employers. Finally, while the book's broadening of the diaspora concept has the potential to bridge scholarly divides on internal and international migration, it might be helpful to clarify how transmigrants' identity and livelihood practices are analogous to those of immigrants conventionally examined in diaspora studies.

Despite these limitations, *Departing from Java* is remarkable for elucidating the structural factors underpinning migration, and is timely for understanding Indonesia's emergence as Southeast Asia's second largest labour exporter today. Students of migration, diaspora, gender, and labour will undoubtedly find the book's rich historical, ethnographic, and transnational approaches engaging and generative.

**Andy Scott Chang**

*University of California, Berkeley*