

# CHANGING LABOUR RELATIONS IN ASIA

An International Research Programme  
1998-2001

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## CONTENTS

Aim and Background	5
Scholarly Approach	6
General Themes	7
Organization	13
Activities	15
How to Contact the Programme	16



## AIM AND BACKGROUND

Asian economies and societies have attracted close attention from policy makers, international development institutions and researchers during the post-war era. There is a multitude of reasons for this, including their strategic geo-political location, population size and density, markets and resources and their colonial links with the West. The changing labour relations in these countries have also attracted some attention, though this has often focused on management aspects and tended to ignore the historical and cultural context, or been inspired by a certain measure of orientalism.

The aim of the present programme is to examine these changing labour relations in greater depth. It does not assume that Asia is in any way exceptional, or indeed that Asia possesses any single homogenous cultural identity. On the contrary, a key tenet of the philosophy underlying the programme is that the vast continent of Asia embraces a huge diversity of historical experiences, cultures and social structures. For this reason, the programme will also aim to build a comparative understanding of labour relations in different parts of Asia currently experiencing diverse historical processes and possessing differing characteristics in terms of their national economies, their links with international markets and the nature of state intervention. In this context, the programme will also examine examples of interdependency between Asia and Europe, such as the activities of transnational corporations and cross-continent migration.

Students of labour have generally focused their research and academic discourse on the East Asian countries, as these were considered both successful and contradictory examples, with their export-oriented markets, strong state regimes and – to differing degrees – active labour movements. Explanations within this discourse have ranged from the cultural to the economic, or have combined both, framed within different macro-level social theories.

However, as we are becoming increasingly aware, the so-called homogenization produced by “globalization” has not prevented growth in Asia from following different trajectories. Some Asian countries are becoming “newly industrialized countries” and securing their position in international markets, while others are still struggling to establish stable economies as they enter the post-communist era. Some are predominantly agricultural and rely on imports for their main industrial products, while

others are reliant on oil exports. Moreover, cultural and religious contexts in these different regions are highly diverse. Within all this variation, the programme will attempt to gain a comparative and historical perspective linking macro and micro-level analyses.

Asian dynamism and volatility have produced a new focus within research: while earlier studies stressed external impediments to development, increasing attention is now being paid to the internal dynamism of Asian societies. Themes that are familiar in a European context are now being explored in an Asian one. They include local élites and entrepreneurs, proto-industry, the cultural bases of economic growth, etc. These themes are situated within the historical specificities of Asian countries, and thus contribute to debates earlier conducted only in Western contexts.

## SCHOLARLY APPROACH

Given that labour relations are multi-faceted and have many different aspects (economic, legal, cultural, gender-related, ethnic, etc.), the project will keep an open mind regarding the choice of theoretical orientation, e.g. (the critique of) political economy, state-centred approaches, rational-choice theory, cultural and symbolic perspectives, etc. There are only two general criteria. Firstly, all theoretical and methodological approaches used in the project should be fundamentally *historical*: that is, they should focus on the causal aspect of every problem studied. The underlying philosophy in this respect is that current problems are always path-dependent: i.e. the product of a long series of events and decisions in the past. Secondly, every approach should be open to discussion: that is, be willing to engage in serious debate with other approaches used in the project.

Whatever the general theoretical approach adopted, the individual research initiatives should (irrespective of theme) include the following:

- International comparisons: This might mean examining two areas or sub-regions in Asia, possibly with contrasting historical experiences (e.g. capitalist and communist countries). But it might also entail comparisons with cases outside Asia (e.g. in Europe) in order to reveal hidden assumptions. Less essential types of comparisons might also be made, for example between the differing patterns of labour relations of different categories of workers within a single historical period or

geographical area. The programme will also be very interested in global linkages, as revealed by transnational corporations, intercontinental migration, etc.

- Emphasis on the material *and* the cultural: Labour relations by definition revolve around the labour process, i.e. the process in which labour power (the worker's potential to work) is converted into labour (the actual work done). This process may be based on economic or extra-economic relations. It may also be part of an intricate web of sub-contracting arrangements operating within and beyond national boundaries. The articulation of multiple forms of labour processes with local structures is often mediated by local cultures, which may be based on a combination of caste, class, religion, race and gender. The subjective experiences and consciousness of workers are therefore shaped by these articulations.
- Different levels of analysis: The interplay between objective conditions and the subjective experiences of different types of workers should be analysed at different levels. Thus community-level or workplace-level studies (which may in themselves involve various types of social units, i.e. households, kin-based groups and/or networks, etc.) should be complemented by state-level or international-level analyses.
- Different labour types: Attention should be paid to various types of labour, e.g. indentured, agrarian, self-employed, casual, informal, etc.

## GENERAL THEMES

Based on the methodological and theoretical considerations described above, the programme will focus on five strongly overlapping general themes: the labour process; labour circulation or mobility; workers' consciousness; the gendering of labour markets and labour relations; collective and individual labour laws and labour movements.

### *The Labour Process and Production Relations*

In the production of primary or secondary goods or in the provision of services, employers basically face the problem of how to organize the labour process in such a way as to maximize profits and compete efficiently. Whether capital is recruiting "free" or "unfree" labour, the

quintessential issue within the labour process is the problem of how to convert workers' potential to work (labour power) into actual work effort (labour). The labour process involves two main interrelated aspects. The first is technical: the division of tasks, production quotas, work speed, degree of standardization and the use of certain types of technology. The second is relational or human: the determination of wage packets (basic wage, fringe benefits, bonuses, etc.); promotions and penalties; the organization of the work environment, and recruitment systems. Both aspects are part of the same process and may have concurrent economic and political dimensions. These may in turn be influenced by various factors: the type of industry/goods or services produced (and thus the market demand for such goods); the competition between different fractions of capital; the regulations enacted by nation-states regarding the production of goods; and the "dispositions" of the workforce itself. The way in which workers enter and respond to the labour process are also mediated by various social and cultural factors and these will have an impact on the labour process. Questions about the labour process should therefore be situated within this dynamic interplay.

In industry, there are different emphases in different Asian countries. This is true even of the East Asian countries, where the scholarly focus has been on the development of large export-oriented firms and the creation of a workforce based on unskilled, young female labour. Some are more decentralized and rural (Taiwan), while others are more centralized and urban (Korea). In agriculture, the introduction of commercial crops has always caused major shifts in the labour process. Plantation systems, nucleus estate systems based on smallholder production, and smallholder production reliant on brokers/traders may exist side by side, creating a complex variety of labour process systems.

Questions relevant across the board include: Are these forms of labour processes replicas of those of the colonial period or of those occurring in the West? Or are they new? If labour processes are becoming increasingly integrated into long chains of processes, how would intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral focuses enrich our analysis? How do these structures affect local forms of labour division, workers' consciousness and gender relations, and how are they affected by them? Do they create a demand for different types of labour and so result in inward and outward movement of different categories of workers? How would it change our analyses of the labour process if we were to broaden our scope to include



processes occurring outside the workplace (that is, in the community and the home)?

### *Labour Mobility*

Labour mobility has always been the result of rapid social transitions and unequal development in different parts of the world. The study of labour mobility may involve various dimensions: time and space; the type of labour involved; the labour processes created, and the mediating factors encouraging or constraining mobility. The time and space element involves the issues of whether mobility is permanent or temporary and whether it occurs within national boundaries or transcends them. Although labour mobility tends in many Asian countries to be characterized by its rural-rural or rural-urban base, its temporary and intermittent nature and its reliance on informal channels of communication, there is growing interest in the phenomenon of longer-term international labour mobility relying on highly structured recruitment channels.

What types of labour are increasingly mobile and under what circumstances do workers migrate? Whereas in the past it was often assumed that it is men who look for work opportunities, whether close to home or further away, and women merely follow them as family members, we now see much more independent mobility on the part of women workers. Adult men and women, young girls and boys all constitute different categories of labour and occupy different positions within the communities from which they originate. The conditions in which workers migrate may be heavily influenced by the characteristics of the labourers themselves.

What kind of labour relations do migrants encounter in the place of work? Are labour relations influenced more by the nature of the work undertaken (i.e. factory-based industrial work; domestic service; seasonal agricultural work; and other types of work that can be classified under the “informal sector”) or by the fact that migrant workers depend for their social security on their employers rather than on the communities from which they originate? State policies regarding immigrant populations have developed in a variety of different ways, regulating the kind of workers crossing particular physical boundaries and in many countries producing various kinds of inter-ethnic tensions and confrontations between locals

and outsiders. How much do we know about the link between social policies and the consequences of labour migration?

It is not only state policies that accelerate and increase labour mobility, while at the same time changing the kind of relations that result from it. Other mediating factors which do so include the role of brokers and recruitment agencies, the existence of physical infrastructure and modern forms of communication.

### *The Gendered Nature of Labour Relations*

The general perceptions and values defining women's roles and identities and their reproductive function have placed women workers in a different position from that of men both in the home and in the labour market. There is some variation in this respect, since factors such as religion, ethnic values, class, generation and age produce differentiation among women themselves. However, gender relations based on fixed perceptions concerning the relationships between men and women, between women workers and capital, and between women and the state still play an important and tenacious role. Gender biases exist across the board in the definition of skills, the structuring of job hierarchies, the recruitment of labour into certain types of sectors or jobs, and in pay policies and state-sponsored social policies for workers. These in turn have a direct impact on the position of women workers in their different social arenas. This impact can be seen in the labour market and the labour process, in the kind of mobility they experience, in the type and forms of consciousness they manifest, and in the forms of organization and collective action they undertake. The first two areas of analysis have been briefly mentioned above, the latter two will be discussed below.

Various general questions are relevant to all the themes: to what extent are gender-based assumptions shaped or mediated by political and economic forces, which in turn are driven by the politics of legitimacy and the (economic) need to obtain profits? To what extent do these assumptions change as a result of the political and economic exigencies interacting with the nature of local labour markets and the "traditional" forms of labour division? If we compare the development of the situation in Asia with that in parts of Western Europe where the feminization of labour in certain areas of work is associated with the separation of home and work and the domestication of women in general, how do we view

the historical development in the Asian countries? What are the forces that generate such tendencies, and are they similar to or different from those in the West?

### *Labour Consciousness*

Material conditions of existence as particularly shaped by corporate capital generate a certain commonality of experience based on the dependence of the worker on the employer for his/her subsistence and reproduction. Such experiences generate certain dispositions to act in particular ways although they do not dictate the types of action that result in practice, since these are mediated by factors such as gender, race and class, as well as by local norms and traditions. These subjective experiences and dispositions should always be seen in the context of relations between workers, between workers and agents of capital and the state, and between practice and policy. Women's association with the home and domestic work may make their interests somewhat different from those of men. The way in which policies distinguish between men and women workers, or between different ethnic groups and age categories may produce different interests and different forms of collective or individual action. In the past, attention focused chiefly on the more manifest forms of resistance, but over the last fifteen years a greater emphasis has been placed on small-scale "everyday" forms of resistance. The question then is what constitutes resistance. What some people see as "resistance", others may classify as a "survival strategy". An alternative focus has been placed on the process by which local traditions adapt to meet the new "demands", as experienced through the mediation of workers themselves. Workers' consciousness and the kind of strategies workers pursue may emerge from their traditional cultural framework, but they may also derive from the nature of the labour relations that have emerged more recently in the market or the workplace.

Another set of problems surrounds the complex methodological question of how to identify "consciousness", how to relate individual and collective consciousness and how to relate these to individual and collective action.

### *Labour Legislation and “Old” and “New” Labour Movements*

Asian countries have shown differing levels of labour militancy. The existence of a tradition of labour militancy is usually linked with a high level of unionization. For this reason, many studies of labour movements have concentrated on formal, organized labour (i.e. workers organized within unions) and ignored other forms of mass-based organizations. Particularly prior to the industrial development of many countries in Asia, unions played a major role not only in organizing workers to demand better conditions but also in influencing the priorities of national policies. In the past, these unions were linked to political parties and made their mark at the national level through those channels. However, with the drive towards rapid industrialization, and also with the diminishing role of the socialist and communist political apparatus all over the world, worker-union-party links have been severed through strong state intervention. This has taken many forms: legislation, redefinition of labour or mass-based organizations, and redefinition of the role of the military. Legislation has often been a combination of welfare and repressive measures.

The focus is now shifting to “new” social movements and their relation to new forms of labour movements. These social movements are characterized by weak or less direct links with political parties. In some countries they are involved in organizing workers in non-factory workplaces and are also forging links with other elements of the national “opposition”, i.e. students and intellectuals. These groups face various problems in the new economic order: the mobility of capital, strong government control and the limited capacity of various sectors to absorb labour. On the other hand, the greater integration of national economies into the world system has brought increased international political intervention, often to the disadvantage of the labour movement but sometimes to its benefit. These different conditions in which the balance of power operates have also created different scope for the labour movement in each country. How do the different categories of labour encourage or inhibit the development of a labour movement in each country? How does a country’s position in global politics influence the type of state intervention and labour movements emerging within it? How are different interests promoted or repressed in the attempt to build a strong lobby at the national and international levels?

## ORGANIZATION

Our approach suggests a number of interdependent research projects, each of them centred around a specific set of problems to be studied on the basis of historical and/or international comparisons. The various planned research initiatives are to be pursued in synchrony, either complementing each other thematically or situated within a comparative perspective in relation to each other. The programme will not initiate research on labour in Asia at random, but will relate each research initiative to other research projects. It will include six to eight working parties, grouped around workshops. They will each operate under the responsibility of two scholars, preferably one based in Asia and one based in Europe, who will have the task of developing the chosen topic, organizing the workshop and publishing the results. The coordinating scholars will be responsible for the actual intra-Asian comparisons (and for any European-Asian comparisons). Coordination between the individual initiatives will take place from Amsterdam.

### *Supporting Institutions*

At the time of writing, the research programme is supported by three institutions:

- The International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, The Netherlands, is the initiator of the project and is providing the lion's share of the funding.
- The Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen, Denmark, supports the aims of the project and is helping to raise funds.
- The International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, is responsible for practical coordination and is providing staff and other resources to support the project.

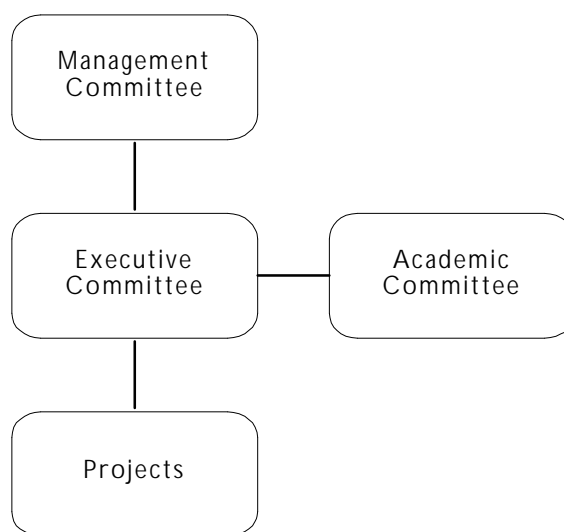
Other kindred institutions are invited to join IIAS, NIAS and IISH in the project.

### *Committees*

IIAS, NIAS and IISH are represented on the *Management Committee*, which supervises the project's financial activities and fixes the annual budgets. The Management Committee is to meet once a year.

Day-to-day substantive and administrative leadership is provided by the *Executive Committee*, located at IISH. It consists of the programme coordinator Dr Ratna Saptari (secretary) and Professors Jan Breman, Jan Lucassen, Willem van Schendel, Thommy Svensson and Marcel van der Linden (chair). The Executive Committee will supervise the various research initiatives in Asia.

The Executive Committee receives scholarly advice from the *Academic Committee*, consisting of European and Asian experts in the field of Asian labour history and labour relations. The Academic Committee is to meet once a year.



### *Projects*

The research programme aims to support the greatest possible number of research or educational projects, organized either individually or jointly with other institutions. Three types of projects are currently recognized:

- Initiatives entirely financed and administered by the programme are to be known as *core projects*. They will be strictly academic in character and include conferences and workshops organized as part of the programme itself, but also panels and contributions to discussion at conferences organized by third parties.
- Since the programme covers a broad geographical area and has a wide thematic scope, it is inevitable that there will be other research projects

working on the same themes or in the same geographical areas. The programme is interested in collaborating on a friendly and supportive basis with as many other related research programmes as possible. Mutual consultation with such *allied projects* will enable some harmonization of activities to take place. Our first partner at this level is the Center for Social Change and Critical Inquiry at the University of Wollongong (Australia), with which joint working arrangements have now been agreed.

- The results of research conducted under the programme will have a high degree of social relevance. For that reason, we think it important that they should be made available to interested parties outside the academic world. *Outreaching* may be achieved via training courses for trade unionists and others and via workshops on themes of particular current relevance.

## ACTIVITIES

### *Programme Workshops*

The programme will organize annual or biennial workshops of a general and strategic nature. So far, two general programme and management meetings have been held: one in Amsterdam on 11 October 1996 to launch the project and one in Manila on 23-26 October 1997 to discuss methodological and substantive issues underlying the determination of research priorities.

### *Research Workshops*

At present four types of workshops can be identified:

- Workshops initiated under the auspices of the programme. On average, two of these workshops are planned per year. Topics will i.a. include “Asian Women in Transition”, “Asia’s Changing Labour Laws”, “Individual and Collective Strategies of Asian Labouring Households” and “Subcontracting”.
- Workshops/conferences for which the programme organizes a labour panel.
- Workshops which members of the programme attend as observers or full participants, or about which they are informed.

- Outreach workshops designed to disseminate research results to a broader public.

### *Networking*

The programme aims to create closer links between scholars studying Asian labour relations in Asia and elsewhere. A precondition of such links is regular contact via conferences, workshops and publications, but this by itself is not sufficient. For this reason, the programme intends to establish and maintain a public database of information about the research interests, publications, etc. of both junior and senior researchers in the field.

### *Publications*

- *Working papers on Asian Labour*: a series with a modest circulation, designed to foster links between scholars in core and allied projects working on related topics.
- *Changing Labour Relations in Asia*: an English-language academic book series, possibly combined with translations in several Asian languages. Two types of books are envisaged: monographs and volumes of essays based on workshops.
- Articles in refereed and other journals.

## HOW TO CONTACT THE PROGRAMME

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