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Claude Chevaleyre

# Beyond Maritime Asia. Ideology, Historiography, and Prospects for a Global History of Slaving in Early-Modern Asia

## 1 A Decade of Significance

Ten years ago, I concluded my first publication with the following statement: ‘Time has come to reintegrate the Chinese experience in the world history of bondage.’<sup>1</sup> One decade later, significant progress has been made in the fields of slavery and forms of coerced labour in early-modern Asia. An active network of (global) historians exploring the dynamics of slavery and slave trading across the Indian Ocean World and Eurasia has emerged. Milestone monographs have been added to the short list of studies published since the 1980s<sup>2</sup> – like Richard Allen’s *European Slave Trading in Asia*, Tatiana Seijas’ *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico*, Jeff Eden’s *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia*, and Lúcio de Sousa’s *The Portuguese Slave Trade in Early Modern Japan*, to name only a few.<sup>3</sup> In addition, collaborative research projects designed to further bridge the gaps in the history of slavery and coerced labour in early-modern Asia have been set in motion;<sup>4</sup> conferences and workshops have been organized worldwide; and several edited volumes and special issues have been published or are in preparation.<sup>5</sup> Noteworthy enough, early-modern Asia and the Indian

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1 Claude Chevaleyre, “Acting as Master and Bondservant: Considerations on Status, Identities and the Nature of ‘Bond-servitude’ in Late Ming China,” in *Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, 17th–20th Centuries*, ed. Alessandro Stanziani (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 272.

2 James L. Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Anthony Reid, ed., *Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983); Georges Condominas, ed., *Formes extrêmes de dépendance. Contributions à l’étude de l’esclavage en Asie du Sud-Est* (Paris: Éditions de l’EHESS, 1998); Gwyn Campbell, ed., *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2006).

3 Richard B. Allen, *European Slave Trading in Asia, 1500–1850* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jeff Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Lúcio de Sousa, *The Portuguese Slave Trade in Early Modern Japan: Merchants, Jesuits and Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Slaves* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

4 E.g., “Exploring Slave Trade in Asia” (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History), <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/research/projects/slave-trade-asia>. Samantha Sint Nicolaas, Matthias van Rossum, and Ulbe Bosma, “Towards an Indian Ocean and Maritime Asia Slave Trade Database: An Exploration of Concepts, Lessons and Models,” *Esclavages et Post-Esclavages* 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/slaveries.2192>.

5 Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Alicia Schrikker and Nira Wickramasinghe, eds., *Being a Slave: Histories and Legacies*

Ocean World have made their way into historical handbooks of world slavery (like the *Cambridge World History of Slavery* and the recently-published *Les mondes de l'esclavage*),<sup>6</sup> while East Asian studies seem to progressively acknowledge the necessity to engage with the questions raised by this emerging trend.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past decade, historians have thus shone new light on the ubiquity of slavery across the Indian Ocean World and Asia, and on its transcontinental connections; they have started to map and to quantify trades in enslaved people that may well have been numerically as important as the transatlantic slave trade;<sup>8</sup> they have underlined the role of individual and private actors, in addition to states and companies; and they have singled out the multidirectionality of slave trading networks, as well as the complex articulations between the diverse regimes of coercion that these networks connected. By 'provincializing Europe'<sup>9</sup> and the Atlantic, they also have significantly contributed to questioning the centrality of modern Europe (its experience and categories) as a universal reference for analysing slavery and coerced labour in a global perspective.

In light of the progress recently achieved, questions arise as to the directions that historians should take to further develop research on slavery and other forms of coercion in early-modern Asia. From my perspective as a historian of early-modern China (by training) with one foot in global slavery and labour history (by chance), the principal challenge will be the capacity to broaden the perspective beyond the spatialities and the temporalities shaped by the European presence. To obtain a truly global overview of the history of slavery and coerced labour in early-modern Asia requires that historians also investigate these dynamics in Asia before, beyond, and alongside the European presence. What is at stake is our ability to understand

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of *European Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020); Titas Chakraborty and Matthias van Rossum, "Slave Trade and Slavery in Asia. New Perspectives," *Journal of Social History* 54, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

<sup>6</sup> Volumes 3 and 4 of the *Cambridge World History of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 and 2017), for instance, include chapters on early-modern and modern Indian Ocean World, India, China, East and South-East Asia. Paulin Isnard, Benedetta Rossi, and Cécile Vidal, eds., *Les mondes de l'esclavage. Une histoire comparée* (Paris: Seuil, 2021). See also Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Bondage and Human Rights in Africa and Asia* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Johanna Ransmeier's *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017) is one of the rare publications engaging with the issue of slavery in modern China to have been published in the past years. More recently, the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* endeavored to dedicate a special issue to the topic of slavery in Asia (vol. 81, forthcoming 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Matthias van Rossum, "Towards a Global Perspective on Early Modern Slave Trade: Prices of the Enslaved in the Indian Ocean, Indonesian Archipelago and Atlantic worlds," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2021): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022821000139>.

<sup>9</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

not only the complexity of the networks of human trafficking and the multiplicity of coercion regimes that pre-existed and continued to exist alongside European networks, markets, and sites of coercion, but also the ways in which pre-existing and more distant regimes of coercion actually connected to, interacted with, were influenced by, and in return influenced European-driven dynamics. What is at stake, ultimately, is the chance of truly ‘decentering’ Europe by operating a further translation movement (in the Latin sense of *translatio*): to look at European history from an Asian perspective (and thereby contribute to properly recontextualize Europe and ‘unthink’ the universal categories inherited from its modern history).<sup>10</sup>

At an individual level, such a project may be utopian at best. At a collective level, however, it can serve as a guideline and an incentive to increase our engagement with other historiographies and with historians investigating ‘non-European’ slaving contexts – in particular through translations, closer collaborations, and sustained dialogue. Doing so also requires us to investigate the reasons for the relative absence of ‘non-European’ Asian contexts in the current trend of research about slavery in Asia. Why are Chinese regional and local contexts, for instance, so absent from the narrative, despite the salient presence of Chinese actors all across maritime Asia – not only as enslaved and coerced workers, but also as entrepreneurs, as slave-owners, and as middlemen and facilitators?<sup>11</sup>

## 2 Ideology and Slavery in Early-Modern East Asian Historiography

The lack of ‘local’ sources only partly explains this situation. In some contexts, slavery and other forms of coercion are mainly documented by the massive paper trails produced by European companies, courts, and individual actors in the process of acquiring, exchanging, transporting, and using enslaved people. Yet, despite the many losses in primary documentation (due to destruction and the passage of time), historical archives from early-modern China still abound. One difference with European archives, though, is that data on enslavement remains scattered and fragmentary. The illicit nature of the commercial trade in human beings (which must be distinguished from the legitimate transactions which were at the core of the reproductive strategies of the Chinese family, like marriage and adoption) makes the identification of relevant information highly contingent on cases surfacing unpredictably in judicial archives

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<sup>10</sup> Christian G. de Vito, Juliane Schiel, and Matthias van Rossum, “From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History,” *Journal of Social History* 54, no. 2 (2020): 644–62, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shz057>.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Adam Clulow and Fei Si-yen, “The Slaves of Widow Tsieko: Chinese Slave Owners and the Enslaved in the Dutch Empire,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 81 (forthcoming 2022).

and other sources. Despite such differences and limitations, preliminary research demonstrates that reconstructing networks of human trafficking in early-modern China is possible, and that among the most far-reaching of these networks some were probably more directly connected to European slave-trading activities than is usually acknowledged.<sup>12</sup>

Another factor explaining the relative absence of ‘non-European’ contexts in the emerging trend of research about slavery in early-modern Asia might be sought in what Moses Finley called ‘ideology’.<sup>13</sup> The recent eastward expansion of slavery studies has undoubtedly been made possible by an increased availability of European archives, in particular in digitized form. It is also an outcome of the flourishing field of global history, of which slavery and labour studies have been two major driving forces. But it is also undeniably a response and a contribution to current societal and political debates on the legacies of early-modern European expansionism.<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the history of European slavery in (maritime) Asia has received little attention in societies less dramatically and less directly affected by European colonialism and slave trading (all things being relative). One cannot be surprised, for instance, that the topic is nowadays of lesser concern to Chinese historians and to the Chinese public than, for instance, the exactions committed on Chinese soil in the first half of the twentieth century by Japan’s military expansionism (which included the forced mobilization of workers, prisoners of war, and women for sexual exploitation). This, however, does not explain why research on early-modern ‘local’ forms of slavery and coercion remains so unprolific. One wonders, for example, why no large-scale comparative study of slavery across early-modern East Asia has been published so far – despite the crucial conceptual role that categories like ‘slaves’ (奴婢: read *nubi* in Chinese transliteration, *nuhi* in Japanese, and *nobi* in Korean) and ‘debased people’ (賤民: *jianmin*, *senmin*, *cheonmin*) played at different times and levels in the organization, the justification, and the perpetuation of the social hierarchies that allowed the slavery-like exploitation of individuals and communities in China, Japan, and Korea.

Ideological factors continue to play a significant role in overshadowing research about slavery in early-modern East Asia. Joy Kim perceptively demonstrated that Japanese ideologues manipulated references to slavery in the Chosŏn period (1392–1910) to legitimize the colonization of Korea, and that this manipulation contributed to the long ‘silencing’ of a historical phenomenon of major social and

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<sup>12</sup> Claude Chevaleyre, “Human Trafficking in Late Imperial China,” in *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia, 1250–1900*, ed. Richard B. Allen (Leiden: Brill, 2021): 150–77.

<sup>13</sup> Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980): chap. 1.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, the acknowledgment that slavery in the Dutch colonial period (including Asia) ‘is an integral part of the history of the Netherlands’ was at the core of the ‘Slavery’ exhibition organized by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 2021: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/slavery> (accessed 2 June 2021).

economic significance.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary China has a different ‘problem with slavery’, to borrow a catchphrase recently used by Michael Zeuske (and before him by Eduard Erkes).<sup>16</sup> Simply put, the debate about the importance of slavery in Chinese history was locked in the 1950s with the adoption of the Stalinist five-stage model of development as the historiographical doxa of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The ‘slavery theory’ spearheaded by historian and politician Guo Moruo (1892–1978)<sup>17</sup> made ‘slavery’ a necessary stage in China’s linear development path toward modernity and socialism, and thereby an exclusive feature of pre-imperial times, as illustrated in the introduction to a general *History of Slavery* published in 1973:

The slave-owning system is the first social mode of production established on class antagonisms. [It] developed into the feudal serfdom system, and the feudal serfdom system developed into the capitalist wage-labour system, which are the three successive forms of exploitation in the development path of class societies. [ . . . ] History is entirely a history of class struggles, and the slave society is the starting point of the history of class struggles. [ . . . ] The slave society is a necessary stage in the development of human societies. [ . . . ] The idea [ . . . ] that there was no slave society in China, is an anti-Leninist and anti-Maoist thought.<sup>18</sup>

Intrinsically tied to a ‘mode of production’, a ‘stage’, or a ‘system’, slavery could be of no significance in an imperial period characterized by ‘feudal’ relations. At best, one could recognize ‘remnants of slavery’ (*nulizhi canyu* 奴隸制殘餘) in early-modern China, but relations of ‘exploitation’ (*boxue* 剝削), ‘class contradictions’ (*jieji maodun* 階級矛盾), ‘class struggles’ (*jieji douzheng* 階級鬥爭), and ‘peasant movements’ (*nongmin zhanzheng* 農民戰爭) – which historians studied extensively in the second half of the twentieth century<sup>19</sup> – were perceived as being in essence of a feudal nature. As a consequence, and despite ongoing debates about the nature of Chinese feudalism,<sup>20</sup> there was and still is no place for ‘slavery’ in early-modern China, either as a social reality or as an abstraction.

**15** Joy Sunghee Kim, “Representing Slavery: Class and Status in Late Chosŏn Korea” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2004): 38–60.

**16** Eduard Erkes, *Das Problem der Sklaverei in China* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1952); Michael Zeuske, “Versklavte und Sklavereien in der Geschichte Chinas aus global-historischer Sicht. Perspektiven und Probleme,” *Dhau. Jahrbuch für außereuropäische Geschichte* 2 (2017): 25.

**17** Guo Moruo, *Nulizhi shidai* (Shanghai: Xinwenyi Chubanshe, 1952).

**18** Shi Xing, *Nuli shehui* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1973): ii. The ‘slavery theory’ has been contested since the late 1970s, in particular by the ‘no-slave’ (*wunu*) historiographical school. See Huang Xianfan, *Zhongguo lishi meiyou nuli shehui* (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1981).

**19** E.g., Gu Cheng, *Mingmo nongmin zhanzheng shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984).

**20** Cf. Feng Tianyu, *Fengjian kaolun* (Wuhan: Wuhan Daxue chubanshe, 2006).

### 3 The ‘Problem’ with Slavery

To be clear, I am not arguing in favour of recklessly transposing the master narrative of slavery ‘as an institution’ onto every historical context where extreme forms of human subjugation can be observed. On the contrary, I would be more inclined to follow Joseph Miller’s exhortation to radically ‘historicize’ slavery and to pay greater attention to the contextualized dynamics of ‘slaving’ as a process, rather than to infinitely expand the scope and meaning of slavery as an abstract category (even for the purpose of broader global comparison).<sup>21</sup> As a historian of bondage and servitude in early-modern China, I know only too well the inevitable distortions that the stereotypes conveyed by the invocation of ‘slavery’ introduce in contexts where it was not previously recognized (like early-modern China), whatever the degree of contextualization. I am also familiar with the utterly undesirable effects that avoiding such a central and paradigmatic analytical framework produces (among which are the risks of perpetuating unintelligibility, cultural relativism, and the marginalization of those same contexts within the field of global slavery studies). In this regard, my own attitude has often shifted from one position to the other, without finding satisfaction in any, but with a growing sense that the categories that we have learned to consider universal are historical constructs rooted in the recent past of the world-dominating West.

Nevertheless, in the case of early-modern China, the ideologically driven and unquestioned rejection of ‘slavery’ has led to a somewhat schizophrenic position. Despite their insistent reluctance to translate the above-mentioned *nubi* category as ‘slaves’, many historians still implicitly define *nubi* in reference to archetypal ‘slaves’, that is as saleable persons subjected to extreme social and legal discrimination, over whom masters exercised rights tantamount to ‘property’ for the sole purpose of their exploitation. Besides being the main cause for the relative absence of China from global narratives, this a priori rejection of the interpretative framework of ‘slavery’ has not only obliterated its heuristic value as a potentially fertile ground for critical debate and comparison. It has also hampered research on phenomena usually considered to be features of slavery.

To take one example, in the introduction to his comparative study of ancient ‘slave societies’ across the world (entitled ‘The slave-owning system is a necessity in the historical development of human societies’), the influential ethnologist and historian Hu Qingjun asserted that the fundamental difference between a slave and a feudal society is that the former mobilizes labour through the ‘abduction of people’, while the latter

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012): chap. 1, esp. 4–10.

‘usually does not resort to the abduction and the selling of people’.<sup>22</sup> As anachronistic ‘remnants of the slave system’, the abduction, trading, and trafficking of human beings in early-modern China have been deemed historically insignificant and have received only limited attention. Approaching *nubi* bondage through the prism of slavery – as distorting as it can be – would nonetheless have led historians to inquire about the existence of human trafficking, about its specific meaning in the imperial context, and about its possible connections with the wider Eurasian and Indian Ocean World slaving web.

The progressive opening and liberalization of the PRC since the 1980s has undoubtedly led to a relative toning down of the Marxian-inspired doxa in historical research which, combined with the increased availability of central and local archives, has permitted a revival of research on bondage in early-modern China (both in China and abroad). Numerous studies on local forms of bondage in Huizhou prefecture (Anhui province) have been published since the 1980s, thanks to the exceptional preservation of hundreds of thousands of ‘Huizhou documents’.<sup>23</sup> Bonded women in the early-modern period (concubines and maidservants in particular) have been the topic of important and innovative studies.<sup>24</sup> Human trafficking has also been explored, in more retrospective ways, by legal historians attempting to trace the evolution of the legal framework of the struggle against trafficking since the Chinese abolition of slavery in 1910.<sup>25</sup> Despite such progress, the weight of the feudal paradigm still seems to prevail in Chinese early-modern historical studies. Historians have not yet begun to address issues such as the dynamics of trafficking, let alone its global entanglements. Interest in social relations of exploitation and coerced labour also seems to have weakened in recent years, especially compared to the times when economic and social historians fully engaged with the (Marxian) study of class struggles as an historical driving force.

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22 Hu Qingjun and Zhou Yongyi, “Nuli zhanyou zhi shi renlei shehui lishi fazhan de biran,” in *Zaoqi nuli shehui bijiao yanjiu*, ed. Hu Qingjun (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996): 4.

23 Harriet T. Zurndorfer, *Change and Continuity in Chinese Local History. The Development of Huichou Prefecture 800 to 1800* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Joseph P. McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order in South China, vol. 2, Merchants, Markets, and Lineages, 1500–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). On the ‘Huizhou documents’, see Li Bian “One Thousand Years of Historical Relics: The Huizhou Documents,” *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 10, no. 2 (2016): 248–68.

24 Wang Xueping, *16–18 shiji binü shengcun zhuangtai yanjiu* (Harbin: Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, 2008); Li Qingrui, *Qianlong nianjian Sichuan guaimai furen anjian de shehui fenxi* (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2011); Bao-hua Hsieh, *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014); Matthew H. Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Wang Xueping, *Mingdai binü qunti yanjiu* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2019).

25 Liu Xianquan, *Daji guaimai renkou fanzui de falü duice* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2003); Bonny Ling, “Human Trafficking and China: Past and Present” (PhD diss., National University of Ireland, Galway, 2014).



This being said, if the next step is to move beyond Europe in the study of slavery in early-modern Asia, it is necessary to carefully evaluate the recent contributions of Chinese scholarship in this domain. Since the accession of Xi Jinping to the highest office of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, the PRC has entered a ‘New Era’ marked by new ideological paradigms emphasizing the ‘great rejuvenation of Chinese culture’ and the prevalence of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Chinese historians have unambiguously been called on to take part in the project of society designed and steered by the Party.<sup>26</sup> The question is thus whether the new ideological context is likely to boost or to impede research on slavery in early-modern China.

## 4 Slavery and Coercion in Recent Chinese Historiography (2011–2020)

To help answer this question, I attempted to evaluate the level of engagement of recent Chinese-language scholarship with the fields of slavery and coerced labour in China, Asia, and the Indian Ocean World by surveying articles published in PRC history journals between 2011 and 2020.<sup>27</sup> Although Chinese historians are in a crucial position to help fill important data gaps, their research seldom appears in international publications on global slavery. It is therefore important to try and understand whether this was the result of a lack of mutual communication or of diverging interests.

This extensive keyword-based survey revealed a very rich and lively scholarship. As a community, Chinese historians regularly engage with current historiographical debates and frequently report on leading publications in world and global history (mainly from the English-speaking academic world). Their research often resonates with societal and political concerns,<sup>28</sup> and shows a flourishing interest for world and global history (almost thirteen percent of the surveyed articles were attached to keywords relating to ‘global’, ‘world’, and ‘transnational’ history).

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**26** Xi Jinping, “Xi Jinping zhi Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan Zhongguo lishi yanjiuyuan chengli de hexin,” *Lishi yanjiu* 1 (2019): 2.

**27** This survey was based on a keyword search of the content of Chinese-language history journals published between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2020 and referenced by the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI, ‘most comprehensive gateway of knowledge’ in the PRC): <https://global.cnki.net/index/Support/en/Introduction.html> (accessed 6 June 2021). The sample surveyed contained 29,265 articles and the research was conducted by using 171 different keywords. I intend to publish detailed results in a later article.

**28** The year 2020 witnessed a surge of publications on pandemics and medicine history. Articles on the First World War (especially on the role of Chinese workers in the conflict) abound in a decade marked by centenary commemorations, as do articles on the history of anti-poverty policies (the eradication of poverty by 2020 being a major commitment of the CCP in the past decade).

However, according to this survey their interests seem to lie elsewhere than in slavery and coerced labour in early-modern Asia.

From the handful of articles published in the past decade on the ‘East India companies’, for instance, one would hardly learn anything about the early-modern trade in Asian slaves. Instead, Chinese historians working on European companies are much more concerned with the first economic globalization, European colonialism, and the early-modern trade in global commodities (opium, sugar, coffee, salt, spices, cotton, silk, and most importantly tea). Their production is particularly committed to ‘decentring’ Europe and putting China back at the centre of world history, both as a major actor of global trade and as a dominant vector of cultural influence across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean World long before the modern period (thanks to the maritime and continental ‘silk roads’).<sup>29</sup>

One salient result of this survey was that even to Chinese scholarship, labour history is still predominantly a history of modern and contemporary Europe (three quarters of the surveyed articles on ‘labour’ dealt with the period between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries; one half was about labour in European history – versus 20 percent about Chinese history). Once narrowed down to publications on the pre-twentieth century era, the ‘labour’ sample hardly revealed any renewed interest in the study of forms of coerced labour in early-modern China and in continental and maritime Asia more widely. With very few exceptions (like an article exploring the transformations of the forced labour market throughout the Pacific between 1863 and 1911 and several papers dealing with premodern times),<sup>30</sup> most articles touched upon labour only in relation to incomes and GDP reconstructions, or endeavoured to compare China’s long development path with various countries (like England, Japan, and Holland).

Despite the use of numerous keywords, the survey proved surprisingly unsuccessful to unearth even a small body of literature on slavery and coerced labour in early-modern China and Asia. ‘Debt’, for instance, returned no result at all. Other keywords related to ‘coercion’, ‘dependency’, and more specific categories of bonded workers returned very few relevant results – among which were articles on the Dutch *cultuurstelsel* (forced cultivation system) in nineteenth-century Indonesia,<sup>31</sup> on ‘tenants’ and ‘serfs’ in ‘Ancient’ China (often in a comparative perspective),<sup>32</sup> on enslavement in the

<sup>29</sup> As an example, see Zhu Lixia, “Haishang sichou zhi lu yu Zhonghua wenming zaoqi chuanbo,” *Remin luntan* 11 (2020): 142–44.

<sup>30</sup> Wang Hua, “Nan Taipingyang daomin qiangzhi laogong maoyi de fazhan, tedian he yingxiang,” *Shijie lishi* 3 (2018): 72–84.

<sup>31</sup> Li Cong, “Helan zai Yinni qiangpo zhongzhi dui Huaren de yingxiang,” *Xiandai jiaoji* 12 (2017): 163–64; Ban Xiang, “Heshu Dong Yindu Gongsi,” *Sixiang zhanxian* 37, no. 1 (2011): 17–20.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Yu Jianing, “Qianxi Zhong-Xi fengjian shehui zhong diannong yu nongnu de tongyi,” *Wenhua xuekan* 2 (2019): 236–38.

Korean Koguryŏ period (37 BCE–668 CE),<sup>33</sup> and on the transformations of labour regimes in the *tusi* system (the ‘native chieftaincies’ used as proxies of indirect rule on China’s borders) in the Qing period (1644–1911).<sup>34</sup> ‘Slaves’ and ‘slavery’ did return a more substantial number of articles, albeit unsurprisingly focused in their great majority on the transatlantic slave trade and on slavery in the New World and in the Mediterranean world. The topic of slavery in Asian history represented almost ten percent of the ‘slavery’ sample. However, it showed an overemphasis on the premodern period (mostly on pre-imperial and medieval China, but also on premodern Japan and Korea, ‘feudal’ Vietnam, and the central Asian slave trade in the second half of the first millennium CE).

More surprising was the fact that idioms and categories of common use in early-modern China returned very few results. Usual expressions for ‘self-sales’, such as ‘enslavement contract’, ‘commendation’, ‘pawning’, and ‘trafficking’ returned no result at all; neither did the commonplace dyads ‘honourable-mean’ and ‘master-slave’. Interestingly enough, the term ‘mean people’ brought forth only one article on *yamen* servants in Qing China,<sup>35</sup> but pointed to several articles on *burakumin* in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Japan, on the *yangban* (ruling) elite in Chosŏn Korea, on ‘slaves’ (*nubi*) and ‘household people’ (*iejin*) in Heian Japan (794–1185), and on castes in India.

Browsing through the relatively small number of articles published on *nubi* led to similarly mixed results. Besides several articles using the term to speak of bondspeople in ancient Rome, Greece, and medieval Europe, I found six articles on its early-modern Korean equivalent (*nobi*), three on premodern Japanese *nubi*, and one devoted to demonstrating how slavery developed within the Vietnamese ‘feudal’ society.<sup>36</sup> As for China, the term was foregrounded in eight articles on premodern history (from early Antiquity to the Song period), but only once in the early-modern context – in a study on the persistence of human sacrifices up to the late imperial period.<sup>37</sup> This manifest interest for the history of slavery in Korean and Japanese (and Vietnamese) history is a welcome development that could pave the way for comparative studies across Eastern Asia. The apparent decline of interest for this category in early-modern China, on the other hand, sounds like a significant step away from a formerly vivid research field.

The results of this brief exploration of recent Chinese-language scholarship demonstrated that, overall, coercion and coerced mobilities still hold an important

33 Liu Ju and Dong Jian, “Gaogouli youren yanjiu,” *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 12 (2017): 126–33.

34 Gong Yin, “Guanyu Zhongguo *tusi* zhidu yuanyuan fazhan yanjiu de shige wenti,” *Qinghai minzu yanjiu* 24, no. 1 (2013): 111–18.

35 Xie Jianping, “Gudai bukuai. Yiren congye, sandai buxu canjia keju,” *Wenshi tiandi* 5 (2013): 93.

36 Yu Junjun and He Anshun, “Yuenan zaoqi de shehui xingzhi he tedian yanjiu,” *Sixiang zhanxian* 39, no. 2 (2013): 203–5.

37 Li Ling, “Zhongguo gudai de renxunzhi,” *Shuwu* 7 (2012): 9–16.

place in it, especially for the modern period (where women, captives, and indentured workers appear constantly on the move on a Eurasian and global scale). As for the early-modern period, coercion is still a significant issue but one that remains subsumed in a paradigm that addresses it more in terms of regimes of immobilization and oppression of a peasant workforce tied to the land than in terms of forced mobilities and slavery-like exploitation. Pre-mid-nineteenth-century mobilities of enslaved people and captives within China and across continental and maritime Asia hardly ever surface in the surveyed corpus. Does this mean that there is no trafficking to look for in early-modern China? that there was no market for captives and trafficked people? and that transnational slaving networks stopped at the borders of China? In the next section, we shall see that early-modern Chinese sources point to the contrary.

## 5 A Case of Harboursing Traffickers and Runaways

In his *Peregrinations to the North*, Zhejiang historian Tan Qian (1593–1657) briefly describes the ‘market of human beings’ (*renshi* 人市) in Beijing as a place where buyers and sellers openly carried out transactions in people.<sup>38</sup> Tan Qian provides little detail about the ways in which people were brought to the market, their origins, and the transactions held in Beijing in the first years of the Sino-Manchu dynasty. One court record held in the No. 1 Historical Archives of China can help flesh out his depiction.<sup>39</sup> Entitled ‘Memoir on a case of harboursing traffickers and runaways’, this 5,881-character long document not only gives detailed information about one particular trafficking network. It also provides insights into the dynamics of trafficking in Northern China, possible wider entanglements, and the ways in which the introduction of Manchu slavery created opportunities for traffickers.

Drafted on 25 September 1656 by Udari (Ch. Wudali 吳達禮), Manchu Vice-President of the Office of Arrests (the *dubu yamen* 督部衙門, subordinate to the Board of War), the memoir contains more than 30 statements of cross-examinations held successively by the Beijing Southern Police Patrol (*nanying* 南營) and by the Office of Arrests.<sup>40</sup> At the centre of the case was a man by the name of Pi Si 皮四, accused with several others of harboursing two fugitive bannerwomen (named Er Jie 二姐 and Da Jie 大姐) and of abducting one man (named Yu Er 於二). Despite the

<sup>38</sup> Tan Qian, *Beiyou lu* [ca. 1660] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2006): 386.

<sup>39</sup> “Wudali ti yinni guaifan taoren shi ben,” in *Qingdai dang’an shiliao congbian*, ed. Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’anguan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984): vol. 10, 107–15.

<sup>40</sup> On the Office of Arrests and early-Qing regulations on runaways, see Hu Xiangyu, “The Juridical System of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing (1644–1900)” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2011): chap. 6.

contradictions they contain, these statements allow us to reconstruct the ways in which Pi Si's trafficking network operated.

## 6 Running Away from the Banners in Early-Qing Beijing

In the beginning, the case had nothing to do with trafficking, but with the escape of a woman (Da Jie) from the Beijing Banner garrison – an issue that Manchu authorities took very seriously and against which harsh regulations had been promulgated in 1654.<sup>41</sup> According to the statements, Da Jie – the ‘household slave’ (*jiaren* 家人) of a bannerman widow<sup>42</sup> – had run away from the Beijing garrison in August 1654. Arriving in Tongzhou, a few miles east of Beijing, she met the shop owner Pi Si, who ‘took her with him’ (*daihuo* 帶伙) and soon became her lover. One month later, Da Jie was recognized on the streets of Tongzhou by the corporal (Man. *bošokū*, Ch. *boshiku* 撥什庫, also known as *lingcui* 領崔) of her mistress’ company (Man. *niru*, Ch. *niulu* 牛錄). As a fugitive slave, Da Jie was arrested, brought to the Office of Arrests, eventually granted a pardon (‘I was not beaten’, she said), and sent back to her mistress in Beijing. ‘Unwilling’ to abandon her, Pi Si sold his business a few months later and moved to the capital to commend himself (*tou* 投) to Da Jie’s mistress (at the request of the mistress, according to Pi Si’s statement) – as many non-banner commoners seeking protection or opportunities did in the first decades of the Qing dynasty despite repeated prohibitions. After discovering that he was of ‘commoner’ status, Pi Si was expelled from the household. What happened next is not wholly clear, due to contradictory statements.

In his statements, Pi Si claims that he had bought Da Jie in 1655 from her mistress’ ‘little uncle’ (presumably a brother of the mistress’ deceased husband and rightful heir to her late husband’s property) at the price of 24 taels. In order to do so, he claimed, Pi Si borrowed money and used one of his associates (Jin Chengyuan 金成元) as a middleman. Since leaving the banner system was prohibited, a member of the Bordered Yellow Banner named Li Fengchun 李逢春 was also used as a figurehead:

41 Xiangyu Hu, “The Juridical System of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing (1644–1900)”: 218–25. The Eight banners were the backbone of the Manchu social and military organization (which was also composed of Han Chinese, Mongols, and Koreans). A large number of bannermen were stationed in the ‘inner city’, also known as the ‘Tartar city’. See Mark C. Elliot, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

42 In the context of the Eight banners, the term *jiaren* (lit. ‘household person’) is a polysemic one. It can refer to members of a household in general and to enslaved people in particular – also named ‘banner slaves’ (*qixia nupu* 旗下奴僕). See Guo Runtao, “Qingdai de jiaren,” *Ming–Qing luncong* 1 (1999): 376–95.

His name was recorded on the Banner registers as the rightful purchaser of Da Jie. After the widow remarried (on 22 February 1656), her new husband asked Pi Si to commend himself to him. Upon refusing, Pi was punched, insulted, and sent away.

The widow, however, had a very different version of the events (which was later confirmed). On the verge of being sent away to her birth family by her late husband's relatives, she had entrusted Jin Chengyuan with 24 taels to purchase Da Jie from her 'little uncle'. Once she had remarried, Pi Si visited Da Jie and her mistress with the intention of commending himself to the widow's new husband. The new husband refused and sent Pi Si away, on the grounds that he was not a member of the Banners. Eventually, Da Jie ran away on 16 June 1656 to join Pi Si. The couple then hid in a vagrants' house (*qiliusuo* 棲流所) near Dongbian Gate (east of Beijing), where Pi Si's younger brother Pi Er 皮二 had taken residence with another fugitive bannerwoman named Er Jie. There, the Pi brothers and their associates carried on with their trafficking business for a little more than ten days until they were arrested.

## 7 The Business of Human Trafficking

Pi Si's statements provide various details about his activities as a trafficker (*guaifan* 拐販). He apparently started to make a profession of trafficking people (*guaimai renkou* 拐賣人口) after selling his shop. His first victim earned him 18 taels, which he allegedly spent on purchasing Da Jie. From then onward, Pi Si regularly obtained people procured by a network of associates who 'specialized in abducting people everywhere' (*zhuan zai gechu guairen* 傳在各處拐人). His role in the organization was that of a receiver: He paid a fixed price of 4 taels per captive (approx. 150 grams of silver), whom he resold at an average price of 8 taels to Jin Chengyuan. Jin in turn resold the captives at prices varying from 16 to 30 taels. Between early 1655 and early 1656, Pi Si acknowledged the trafficking of a hundred persons whose names he couldn't all remember. For the first six months of 1656, he was nonetheless able to give the particulars of the 'trafficked' persons (*guailai* 拐來). His initial statement records the names and origins of 17 individuals procured by his associates from various locations. Among them, 12 were from Zhili province (i.e., from around Beijing); three from Zhejiang province; and two from Jiangsu. In addition, Pi confessed to having abducted two persons by himself: An 'old mother' from Tongzhou; and the fugitive bannerwoman Er Jie (abducted in the north of Beijing and given to his younger brother as a wife). His associates also reported the abduction of another individual from Yongping (also in Zhili province) and one from Huguang province (Tab. 1).

**Tab. 1:** List of the 21 persons funnelled into Pi Si's trafficking network in 1656, according to the information recorded in the case.

Victim Name	Origin	Abductor(s)	Outcome
Mrs. Sun 孫	Tongzhou 通州 (Zhili); an old lady (老媽媽, 老婆子)	Pi Si 皮四	Sold to banner carpenter named Li, in fact Li Fengchun
Bao'er 保兒	Huguang province 湖廣; a 'little child' ( <i>xiaozhi</i> 小子)	Pi Er 皮二 (?)	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Chen Si 陳四	Jinhua 金華府 (Zhejiang)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Er Jie 二姐	Abducted near Houzai Gate (Beijing); a fugitive enslaved woman, plain yellow banner	Pi Si 皮四	Given to Pi Er as wife
Hu Da 胡大	Kaiping 開平 (Zhili)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Ma Da 馬大	Yangcun 楊村 (Zhejiang)	Liu Si 劉四, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Si'er 'the cripple' 四兒 (癱子); also Xiao Si'er 小四兒	Leting 樂亭 (Zhili)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan; sold (16 taels) in Guandong 關東
Song Da 宋大	Caiyu 采育 (Zhili)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Song Er 宋二	Kaiping 開平 (Zhili)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Wang Da 王大	Suzhou 蘇州 (Jiangsu)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Wang Er 王二	Hexiwu 河西務 (Zhili)	Liu Si 劉四, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Xiao Erdi 小二弟	Luanzhou 灤州 (Zhili)	Liu Si 劉四, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Xiao Erzi 小二子	Sanhe 三河縣 (Zhili)	Liu Si 劉四, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Xiao Ma'er 小馬兒	Yanjiao 煙角 (?)	Liu Si 劉四, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Xiao Run'er 小潤兒	Suzhou 蘇州 (Jiangsu)	Liu Si 劉四, Liu Huzi 劉胡子, Zhu Er 朱二, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan

Tab. 1 (continued)

Victim Name	Origin	Abductor(s)	Outcome
Xiao Si'er 小四兒	Sanhe 三河縣 (Zhili)	Liu Si 劉四, Liu Huzi 劉胡子, Zhu Er 朱二, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan
Yu Er 於二	Sanhe 三河縣 (Zhili); abducted in Tongzhou	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan; too old, remained at Jin's service
Zhang Da 'the bald' 張大 (禿子)	Baodi 寶坻 (Zhili)	Liu Si 劉四, Liu Huzi 劉胡子, Zhu Er 朱二, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan; sold (18 taels) to nomads ( <i>sao dazi</i> 騷達子) 'beyond the passes'
Zhang Er 張二	Yongping 永平府 (Zhili)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Pi Si
Zhang San 張三	Luanzhou 灤州 (Zhili)	Liu Si 劉四, Liu Huzi 劉胡子, Zhu Er 朱二, Ma Er 馬二	Given to Jin Chengyuan; sold (18 or 22 taels) to a bannerman in Beijing
Zhu Da 朱大	Ningbo 寧波府 (Zhejiang)	Lan Yigui 藍一貴	Given to Jin Chengyuan

Most of the victims therefore appear to have been from the wider area of the capital city (as far as Kaiping district, a hundred miles to the east). Six out of 21 were nonetheless described as coming 'from' distant locations, such as 'Chen Si from Jinhua' (*Jinhua ren* 金華人), 800 miles south in Zhejiang province. From the victims' origins (which might simply refer to their places of residence), one can hardly conclude that Pi Si's men travelled long distances to acquire people. Their victims may well have been travellers abducted near Beijing, like Yu Er 'from Sanhe district' (thirty miles east of Beijing), who was seized in Tongzhou (less than ten miles away). We nonetheless observe that the captives from southern provinces were mainly brought by the same traffickers, like Lan Yigui 藍一貴, who alone procured Pi Si with one person from Jiangsu and two from Zhejiang. Although this is not sufficient evidence to conclude that they actually 'abducted people everywhere', two elements suggest that Pi Si and his suppliers were probably links in a far-reaching commodity chain.

First, we know that the victims were not only men (like Yu Er) and women (like Er Jie and an 'old mother' surnamed Sun 孫), but also, and perhaps mostly, children, who might have been easier to control over long distances than adults. At least six of these captives can be identified as children by their nicknames (they are



called ‘Little . . .’, like Xiao Erdi 小二弟). A seventh one (named Bao’er 保兒) is unambiguously identified as ‘a little child’ (*xiao zi* 小子). The testimonies provided by the traffickers also make it clear that ‘older’ people were difficult to sell. Yu Er, for instance, is described as ‘too old’ to be sold: After ‘taking him to the market to be sold three or four times’ (*daizhi shishang maile san si ci* 帶至市上賣了三四次), Jin Chengyuan was left with no other choice, he said, than to keep him in his own service. From these elements, it can be inferred that there was an important proportion of children among the victims (at least one third). If Pi Si’s men did not travel long distances to kidnap children themselves, they probably acquired them from other traffickers.

Secondly, although the victims were often sold locally in or nearby Beijing, the reseller Jin Chengyuan admitted to selling people ‘anywhere’ (*fanmai qu gechu* 販賣去各處), and he provides two examples. ‘Little Four’ (Xiao Si’er 小四兒) from Leting (Zhili province) was for instance sold ‘to people from Guandong’ (*zhuanmai yu Guandongren* 轉賣與關東人) or ‘in Guandong’ (*mai zai Guandong* 賣在關東), meaning that the child probably ended up somewhere East of Shanhai Pass, in Manchuria. One Zhang Da ‘the bald’ (*tuzi Zhang Da* 禿子張大) was for his part sold to ‘rancid Tatars’ (*saodazi* 騷達子, i.e., to nomad Mongols) ‘beyond the walls’ (*zai qiangwai* 在牆外) or ‘beyond the passes’ (*zai kouwai* 在口外), which could mean anywhere north of the Great Wall, most likely in Mongolia. Thus, the picture that emerges places Pi Si and his associates at the centre of a regional market in captive men, women, and children, itself embedded in a wider web of coerced mobilities that reached as far as Jiangnan in the South and Mongolia in the North.

Unfortunately, the text says very little about the techniques and the level of violence involved to make the victims submit and accept their fate. All are simply said to have been ‘abducted’ (*guai* 拐). However, ‘abduction’ is as much a description of the actions taken to funnel people into trafficking as a legal incrimination.<sup>43</sup> In addition to kidnapping people, Pi Si and his associates resorted to ‘decoying’, as in the case of the fugitive enslaved bannerwoman Er Jie, whom Pi Si allegedly ‘seduced’ (*hongguai* 哄拐) away from the capital city before handing her over to his brother as a wife. They also resorted to deceit. The old lady Sun from Tongzhou was apparently sold by her husband willingly because of poverty (at the low price of 2.5 taels). According to her statement, Pi Si talked the husband into selling his wife on the pretence of marrying her himself (which was already illicit despite being a common practice). Yet, as she would later discover, the contract had been forged: Unstamped, it named a person other than her husband as the seller, and it made no mention of marriage. The case of Yu Er also illustrates the uses traffickers made of

<sup>43</sup> I have attempted to clarify the distinction between legal transactions in people (marriages, adoptions, and enslavement) and what was regarded as trafficking in early-modern China in another book chapter. See Claude Chevaleyre, “Human Trafficking in Late Imperial China.”

debt to trap their victims. En route to the capital, Yu Er fell ill in Tongzhou, where Lan Yigui 'lured' (*hong* 哄) him into accepting money to buy lifesaving medicine and food. Recovered but unable to pay off his debt, Yu Er was brought by Lan Yigui to the capital city and sold to Jin Chengyuan.

Finally, an interesting point can be made as to how their organization operated. Pi Si had become Jin Chengyuan's sworn brother and partner in early 1655. As a 'person of the household' (*jiaren*) of a banner officer (also named Jin), Chengyuan was an essential component in their lucrative business. Besides finding ultimate purchasers, his main function was that of a 'launderer' for their human merchandise. His connections within the banners' administration gave him access to population registers (*dangzi* 檔子), on which the trafficked persons were 'falsely recorded' (*jiachong* 假充) under the names of actual banner officers. The process – which also involved the payment of the relevant taxes to the Sales Tax Office (*shuikesi* 裡稅課司) – made the ownership of illicitly acquired people look genuine (although under the name of a figurehead owner) and their resale lawful. It ultimately allowed Jin Chengyuan to bring them 'to the market' (*shangshi* 上市) – maybe the same market described a few years earlier by Tan Qian – where they were sold legally.

The case of Pi Si and his associates is only one in a growing 'China Human Trafficking and Slaving Historical Database' project.<sup>44</sup> It demonstrates that available sources can be fruitfully mobilized to (partially) reconstruct the dynamics of human trafficking in early-modern China. It also gives an illustration of the wide-ranging, multidirectional, and potentially transnational dynamics of a phenomenon that flourished before the arrival of European traders and that persisted far into the twentieth century by adapting and taking advantage of the evolutions of the socio-normative environment. Association with a member of the Eight banners was clearly a facilitating factor in Beijing in the 1650s. Therefore, this case reminds us that the necessary expansion of the study of 'slavery in early-modern Asia' requires a fine-grained understanding of the various markets and changing contexts connected by slaving networks.

'Human trafficking' in late imperial China should not be conflated with 'slave trading' as we usually comprehend it and as European operators practiced it in the Indian Ocean World at the same period. As it already was to their Ming (1368–1644) predecessors, trafficking was a 'serious violation of the law' (*dagan faji* 大幹法紀) to the new Manchu authorities – who brought their own tradition of enslavement with them – and even more so when practiced in the 'restricted area of the capital city' (*Jingshi jindi* 京師禁地). Yet in a context where enslavability was regulated by the law and where saleability (especially of women and children) was socially constitutive of the productive and reproductive strategies of 'transactional families',<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> "China Human Trafficking and Slaving Database" (Lyon: Institut d'Asie Orientale, CNRS), <https://iao.cnrs.fr/recherche/projets-de-recherche-2/china-human-trafficking-and-slaving-database/>.

<sup>45</sup> See Johanna Ransmeier, *Sold People*: 2–20.

trafficking took on a particular significance. ‘Trafficking’ did not encompass all transactions in human beings, nor was it restricted exclusively to transactions in slaves. Trafficking was the narrower, illegal side of a commonplace ‘market’ in people. It flourished within the interstices of a society that had a constant demand for people for a wide variety of purposes, and where selling people was a crucial part of survival and wealth strategies.

Without increased efforts to (re)contextualize ‘slaving’, the diverse manifestations of slavery and the variety of coerced labour regimes at the scale of maritime *and* continental Eurasia, no truly global history of slaving in early-modern Asia is likely to emerge. The task is nonetheless daunting. It does not simply require scholars to collect relevant sources and documentation. It also calls on us to reconsider dominant narratives, question current ideologies, and sometimes to think outside the boxes of universal categories and national historiographies. Bearing all of this in mind, early-modern China could be a promising field for the study of ‘slaving’ dynamics (as defined by Joseph Miller) rather than ‘slavery’, as the case study presented above suggests. Despite its richness and the diversity of the research questions it addresses, recent Chinese historiography, as a whole, does not seem to be on the brink of taking on the challenges raised by the growing field of research about slavery in early-modern Asia. As a last example, as of 14 July 2021, the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* referenced no review of Joseph Miller’s *Slavery as History* in any Chinese history journal and only referenced one review for Johanna Ransmeier’s *Sold People* (written in English by Japanese scholar Kishimoto Mio).<sup>46</sup> There are even good reasons to assume that exploring the wider continental entanglements of maritime slavery does not fit with the narratives that Chinese historians are increasingly called on to support in order to sustain the development of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’.<sup>47</sup> This should nonetheless be taken as an incentive for historians of slavery in Asia to increase their engagement with (East-)Asian historiographies and historians. The time has come to bring Asian history fully into a dialogue with the world history of slavery.

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<sup>46</sup> Kishimoto Mio 岸本美緒, “Review: Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China, by Johanna S. Ransmeier,” *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 67 (2018): 307–15.

<sup>47</sup> See the discourse pronounced in January 2019 by Xi Jinping to celebrate the foundation of the Institute of History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Xi Jinping, “Xi Jinping zhi Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan.”