

Female immigration and permanent settlement

Female immigration to the Malay Peninsula from the Malay Archipelago, China and India increased dramatically in the early 20th century, changing the 19th-century demographic profile of a predominantly male immigrant workforce. Many women contributed directly to the economy, as paid and unpaid labour, in the mines, the agricultural sector, and in various types of work in urban areas. They played an even larger role as wives and mothers, nurturing families and transforming a transient male workforce into settled communities.



19th-century immigration

Historically, the Malay Peninsula has been a focus of migration and settlement by peoples from the neighbouring islands of the Malay Archipelago, especially Sumatra and Java. From the mid-19th century, a huge influx of immigrants from China and India added to this traditional migratory flow.

Immigration from all three sources followed a similar pattern. Young adult males came in waves during periods of intense economic growth. The women came later, usually in smaller numbers. In the 19th century, only one in every ten Indian or Chinese arrivals was female, but immigrants from the Malay Archipelago included more women.

From the mid-19th century, thousands of male immigrants from China and India arrived to work in the tin mines and rubber plantations. Many were unmarried. Married workers could not bring their families because of low wages, harsh working conditions and cramped living quarters.

Prostitution

Prostitution increased in the Malay Peninsula after the arrival of immigrants. Young girls were bought, kidnapped or tricked into coming by syndicates and employers of male workers. Yap Ah Loy, the tin magnate who became the Kapitan China of Kuala Lumpur, is reported to have had 200 prostitutes in his brothels in 1883. In 1889, the Straits Settlements had 3,673 registered prostitutes in a Chinese female population of fewer than 50,000. The women lived and worked in sordid, inhumane conditions—worlds apart from the lives led by the wives of successful traders.



To Yap Ah Loy, brothels were a business activity like any other, providing a service to customers.

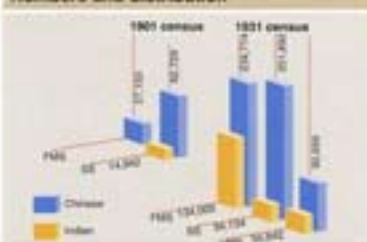
By the 1890s, brothels set up by Japanese prostitutes were still operated in 1911.



20th-century immigration

Female immigration increased dramatically in the early 20th century. In 1923, the government of India stipulated that there should be one female migrant for every 1.5 males. Also, amendments to the Labour Code in Malaya required the provision of rooms for married couples as well as child-care and schooling facilities. The numbers of women and children arriving increased and by the 1920s, women accounted for 30 per cent of all arrivals from India.

Numbers and distribution



FEMALES PER 1,000 MALES

	1911	1921	1931	1947
Chinese	271	371	486	515
Indians	331	424	490	516

NUMBER OF CHILDREN BELOW 15

	1931	1947
Malays	748,142	1,232,558
Chinese	423,418	1,025,480
Indians	163,897	265,213

Female arrivals from China, a steady trickle since 1850, increased dramatically after the 1933 Alien Ordinance set a quota for male immigration. This Act stimulated the recruitment of female workers and encouraged the men to bring in their wives and children. Between 1934 and 1938, when a limit was placed on female immigrants, there was a net migrational gain of 190,000 Chinese women.

The early 20th century also saw a surge in the arrival of women from the Malay Archipelago, especially Java. They came with their husbands to work in smallholdings and plantations in Perak, Selangor and especially Johore where, by 1931, such immigration outnumbered the indigenous.

Economic and social contributions

Many women and children joined the labour force. The Indian women worked as tappers and wooders in rubber estates, constituting 43 per cent of the sector's workforce in the 1940s. Those in the towns worked mainly as domestic servants and labourers, with only a few employed as professionals.

Chinese women worked as *dalang* washers or as casual labourers in rubber estates besides growing vegetable and raising livestock. In towns, they were domestic servants, hawkers, shop assistants, nurses, and teachers. By the 1940s, nearly 54 per cent of the Chinese workforce were women and children. The unskilled work of women in smallholding or peasant families was an important part of farming activities, contributing to household income.

The socioeconomic contribution of women's work in the home was often not recognized, but as wives and mothers female immigrants contributed to a major demographic transformation. With the arrival of more women, more children were born and raised locally, families took root and the transition towards permanent settlement began.

The female immigrants

Chinese

There had been a steady trickle of Chinese women arriving in the Malay Peninsula since the 1850 Convention of Peking allowed wives to leave China to join their husbands abroad. Female arrivals increased dramatically after the 1933 Alien Ordinance set a quota for male immigrants. This stimulated the recruitment of female workers and encouraged men to bring in their wives and children. Between 1934 and 1938, when a limit was placed on female immigrants, there was a net migrational gain of 190,000 Chinese women. As more Chinese moved into the agricultural sector in the 1930s, the proportion of women in the Chinese estate workforce increased from 20 per cent in 1937 to 33.5 per cent in 1947. By the 1940s, female and child workers constituted nearly 54 per cent of the total Chinese workforce, with women in the towns employed in a wide range of occupations.

1. Large numbers of Chinese women came to the Malay Peninsula by ship from the mid-19th century onwards to join their husbands.
2. The number of Chinese women working as *dalang* washers increased from around 12,000 in 1938 to nearly 23,000 in 1946. By then they produced 25.4 per cent of the latex in the sector.
3. A *dalang* (washing) group of female workers from Sumatra, a district in the coastal province of Guangdong in South China. These women were well known for doing heavy manual work.
4. Many Chinese women living in towns worked as domestic helpers.
5. There was a great demand for trained, English-speaking Chinese women. The semi-skilled women looked after the children of Europeans living in Malaya.



Indian



By 1921 there were 82 Indian women to every 1,000 men in Malaya, rising further to 637 per 1,000 by 1947.

The immigration of Indian women increased sharply in the 1920s and 1930s, after the indenture system of labour recruitment was banned (see 'The rubber industry and Indian immigration'). In 1923, the Indian government stipulated that there should be one female migrant for every 1.5 males. Also, improvements in the Malayan Labour Code required employers to provide separate rooms for married couples, as well as some child care and schooling facilities. These new laws encouraged the influx of women and children to the plantations. In the 1920s, Indian women accounted for 30 per cent of all arrivals, and caused a sharp increase in the percentage of Indian women in the plantation workforce, which reached 63 per cent in the 1940s.



As wives and as mothers, women contributed to a major demographic transformation.