



Sources, silence and the senses in the study of the history of global Chinese Labour

August 18, 2025, 10:00 - 17:00

International Institute of Social History (IISG)
Cruquiusweg 31, 1019 AT Amsterdam

topic

A critical engagement with archival material is fundamental to understanding the history of labour in colonial contexts. Central to this inquiry are our reading strategies—both against and along the grain of the archives—which serve as essential tools in navigating and interrogating these sources. In this seminar, we aim not only to contextualize such strategies within the framework of global Chinese labour history—particularly by considering issues such as multilingualism, intermediaries and transcultural dynamics—but also to examine the potential contributions of non-archival

	<p>sources. Special attention will be given to material culture, silence, and the senses. We ask: What insights can objects provide that elude the written archive? When does silence speak more profoundly than text? And what unique dimensions does sensorial information offer in historical analysis?</p>
presentations	<p>Each participant is expected to prepare a presentation consisting of three case studies in total. Goal is to foster collective reflection and opportunities to advance one another's research. In max. 20 minutes each participant is asked to [1] introduce your research, including your motivation for participating in the seminar (ca. 5 minutes) [2] This is followed by one case study highlighting a moment in your research that involved a tension between reading with and against the archival grain. [3] In closing each participant will present two case studies illustrating how material culture, silence, or sensory data complicated, nuanced, or contradicted archival information.</p>
keynote speaker and listener	<p>For this seminar, we are pleased to welcome Professor Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Professor of History and American Studies at Brown University. Professor Hu-DeHart will deliver the opening lecture, <i>Degrees of Freedom and Unfreedom: Chinese Contract Laborers ("Coolies") in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century</i>, and will serve as the seminar's key listener. At the end of the afternoon, she will share her reflections and observations, helping us identify the common threads that connect our research.</p>
procedure	<p>If you wish to participate in the seminar, please let us know by sending an email to fresco.samsin@iisg.nl before July 4. Please send us a few lines about your research interest in the study of the history of global Chinese Labour. We will notify applicants on their acceptance to the seminar before July 7. This seminar is organised by Jens Aurich (IISG), Koen van der Lijn (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) and Fresco Sam-Sin (Things That Talk), both connected to the Contract Labourers and Collective Action project at IISG.</p>