

**PERSONAL REFLECTIONS
ON THE 34TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF ASIAN AND NORTH AFRICAN STUDIES
AND THE IAOL PROGRAMME**

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It is now approaching ten years since I retired from the library scene, and, as a 'non-player', my reasons for attending the 34th *International Congress of Asian and North African Studies* (ICANAS) in Hong Kong in August were purely personal ones - to meet old friends and colleagues from around the world and to take a short holiday in the area. It was a matter of some regret that no-one from the Canberra group of Asian area librarians was to attend, so I was asked to do a short report, particularly on the library programme organised by the International Association of Orientalist Librarians (IAOL). What follows are some personal impressions of the Congress in general and the library sessions in particular from the point of view of one 'returning to the scene after' a fairly lengthy absence.

ICANAS began in Paris in 1873 as the International Congress of Orientalists, and consisted mainly of European scholars of 'Orientalism' as it was then known - i.e. the study of the major classical traditions of the Orient, viz. the Near Eastern, India and Chinese. Since that time, the Congress has met in different cities around the globe every three or four years (with some interruptions for wars and the like), the 29th Congress having been held in Canberra in 1971. Over the years since it began, the scope of the Congress and the ethnicity of the participants has changed considerably. In earlier years the participants were mainly European and the emphasis of contributions was on classical and traditional studies, while in later times the scope has broadened to include modern and contemporary studies in a wide range of disciplines including the social sciences, and more and more Asians themselves have been taking part.

Professor Wang Gungwu, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong and one of the Honorary Presidents of the Congress, noted this increase in interest by Asians in their own cultures in his opening address, and, rather graciously, I thought, gave credit to the Europeans for showing the Asians how to study and appreciate their own traditions. Certainly in such fields as archaeology, anthropology and linguistics, to name but a few, the application of modern Western methods of research and scholarship has resulted in some spectacular discoveries and increases in knowledge in a number of Asian countries in recent years. But beyond that, this outside stimulus has been at least partially responsible for a general consciousness-raising and commitment to Asian studies within the area itself.

My general feeling when attending this Congress was that it was probably a sort of watershed in its own history and that future Congresses will undoubtedly be more and more dominated by Asian rather than Western participants. This is partly due to the factors already mentioned, but perhaps more so to the fact of growing economic power and prosperity within the area, especially of the countries of East and Southeast Asia. Because of China's proximity to this year's

Congress venue, the number of Chinese participants was very striking indeed, and the geographical factor would have meant that many other Asians also would have found it more feasible to attend. But I would expect this trend to continue, even at the next Congress which will be held in Budapest in 1997. A quick check of the countries of origin of the list of participants in the Hong Kong Congress showed that there were almost twice as many from Asia as from non-Asian countries. This would not have been so in the recent past.

The key characteristic of the Congress is its range and diversity. Some critics say that it has become too large (over 2000 participants) and so wide-ranging that it is virtually unmanageable, and I know of one or two participants who were highly critical of the lack of coordination of certain panels and the failure of listed scholars to turn up on the day to present their papers, sometimes resulting in the cancellation of sessions without prior notice.

There's also the language problem - something which always has to be taken into account at international meetings of any kind. While English was the *de facto* official language of this Congress (Hong Kong is still a British colony), there were large numbers of Chinese scholars presenting papers in Chinese, for which no printed English abstract or verbal summary on the day was provided. This meant that virtually no non-Chinese participants were able to take any part in these sessions, although some would have been keen to do so. Again, I had the feeling that the time is fast approaching when we (perhaps arrogant) English speakers can no longer assume that others will defer to us linguistically, even though English is likely to be the *lingua franca* for a good many years to come.

This brings me to the programme conducted by the International Association of Orientalist Librarians. I must say that it was a relief to me that all papers in the IAOL sessions were presented in English or with an English summary. It was a most efficiently planned and organised programme and there was no cause for criticism of the arrangements. The International Association of Orientalist Librarians was inaugurated in 1967 at the International Congress of Orientalists at Ann Arbor, Michigan, and it has organised a panel for librarians at almost every Congress since. It could be said to be a conference within a conference, usually with less than 100 participants. On this occasion the library sessions were continuous, taking place on two consecutive days in one lecture room on each day, and this had the effect of keeping the group together, even though the subject matter of the papers covered a fairly broad range of topics which would not always have been of direct interest to all participants. But there was a sense of professional solidarity and a good spirit prevailed.

With most conferences where papers are called for rather than commissioned or cooperatively planned, there is always something of an *ad hoc* nature to the programme, and it has to be said that the organisers often have some difficulty in getting some sort of shape and logic into the grouping of papers. The Hong Kong IAOL sessions were no exception to this. There was some logic in the opening sessions on Hong Kong itself and China, entitled respectively 'Hong Kong Studies - Special Collections' and 'Libraries in China - Past, Present and Future', but the title of the third session seemed to me to be something of an admission of defeat, *viz* 'Asian Librarianship in the 20th Century'. I have to sympathise with

organisers trying to marry the sometimes disparate themes which people chose to write about when given more or less *carte blanche*. The fourth session was also obviously something of a challenge, being called 'Orientalia - Themes and Bibliographic Resources', and included papers such diverse topics as Arabic manuscripts in Belgian public libraries, and the bibliography of Southeast Asian music. The fifth session, on 'Conservation, Promotion and Automation of Oriental Materials', was again a bit of a grab-bag, although in all these cases there were some excellent papers presented, and it was difficult to know how things could have been better arranged when the subjects were so wide-ranging.

To my mind the most successfully integrated session was the last, 'Automation and Networking of Oriental Library Resources' which included papers covering automation and/or networking in China, Taiwan, Russia and the USA. It was certainly a revelation to me as an outsider to see and hear about the advances in these areas in China and Taiwan and later to see some of these systems in operation when I briefly visited some libraries in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Much of the detail discussed in these papers on automation was beyond my comprehension as a computer illiterate, but I could follow the general drift. The most interesting general point to come out of the whole programme from my point of view was that brought out in the joint paper of Anna Wang and Maureen Donovan of Ohio State University entitled 'Asian Collections in a Networked World: the Time is Now'. This point was that, in contrast to the former situation where Asian collections were out of the mainstream and always the last to be automated, because of the complexities of script input and output, etc., the very technical difficulties as well as the scarcity of resources are now forcing Asian collections to take whatever advantage they can from the networking possibilities now available. At Ohio State University they seem to be pioneering services in this area which are actually in advance of the more general library applications. This has been made possible by excellent teamwork between the East Asian Librarian and the Systems Librarian, and it appears to be leading to some exciting developments, according to their report.

In her section of the paper, Maureen Donovan spoke about the changing requirements for personnel in East Asian collections, and referred to a recent conference held in the USA entitled 'Technology, Scholarship and the Humanities: the Implications of Electronic Information'. She quotes from a paper by Lawrence Dowler given at that conference which emphasised the need for 'greater discipline-based knowledge and an understanding of information technology' in recruiting future librarians¹. The need for discipline-based knowledge has always been recognised by Asian collection librarians, who have traditionally had close cooperation with scholars in the field. The watering down of this requirement is not likely to lead to satisfactory results in the future. The second requirement, an understanding of information technology, is now also paramount, and may well enable Asian collection librarians to leap-frog into the 21st century ahead of their Western-oriented colleagues if they follow the lead of Ohio State University. The details of how they are going about it are contained in the papers of Wang and Donovan of which I obtained copies and which will be available through George Miller at the ANU Library for anyone who is interested.

I have dwelt at some length on this aspect of the IAOL sessions, because it seemed to me to be the one offering the most stimulus to thinking about the future of the field in a positive way. But this is not to say that there were not numerous other contributions which were both interesting and informative. Unfortunately, I did not obtain copies of all the papers, as there were not always enough to go around, but I got what I could, and these will be held in the ANU Library until the Proceedings are published, which I understand will be by the end of the year.

I should like to mention briefly the paper of Chooi-hon Ho of Monash University Library entitled 'Mainstreaming Asian studies: managing library resources for an effective Asian information service in Australian tertiary institutions'. Unfortunately, I was unable to get a copy of her paper, and I only heard less than half of it, but I gathered that the main thrust of it concerned the restructuring of reader services' positions so that a portion of some positions was devoted to Asian information services, which were nevertheless seen as an integral part of the total information service. While this is not a new concept, they seem to have developed at Monash a method of dealing with the 'Asian problem' which they believe to be effective in their situation, and which would no doubt be worthy of following up.

A paper that I found particularly enjoyable, perhaps because it was profusely illustrated with slides of Bhutan, a beautiful Himalayan state providing spectacular backdrops to many of the shots, was that of Felicity Shaw, dealing with the conservation of special materials in the National Library of Bhutan. It made one realise how little is known in the rest of the world about important and innovative programmes for conserving the cultural heritage of small countries with an ancient tradition such as Bhutan.

To sum up my impressions of and reactions to the Congress in general and the IAOL sessions in particular, I would say that this was one of the best such congresses I have attended, certainly as regards the professionalism and efficiency as well as the cohesion of the IAOL sessions. I thought the standard of papers over all was good, even though, as I indicated earlier, some appeared to be unrelated to anything else on the programme. Perhaps that is one of the rather endearing characteristics of old-fashioned 'Orientalism'.

In any case, there was very little 'drifting off' in attendance towards the end, and this may well have been largely due to the fact that all IAOL sessions were consecutive and confined to just two days in the middle of the Congress. It was pleasant for me after such a long lapse to step back into the IAOL setting, and, although there were very few members that I actually knew, to feel as if I still 'belonged' there. Most of the time the language was familiar and the subject matter hadn't changed all that much. As I said earlier, when people started getting technical about systems, networking and so forth, I was left floundering in a sea of acronyms which meant nothing to me, but I was able to let it flow over me and still make sense of the main points - or so I thought. Altogether, it was good fun - especially the two sumptuous Cantonese banquets I attended and the joy of meeting old friends from around the world.

Before I finish, I must get in a 'commercial' for the IAOL. The Hong Kong committee put in a tremendous effort in organising this programme, as well as in gaining new members during their term of office, and it seems to me that the Association is in a healthier state than it has been for a long time.

If you are not already a member, why not consider joining? The fees are moderate and you get a substantial Bulletin at least once a year. This is the only organisation of its kind and I believe it is worth supporting.

References

1. Lawrence Dowler. 'The Implications of Electronic Information for National Institutions', *Technology, Scholarship and the Humanities: the Implications of Electronic Information: Summary of Proceedings* (Falls Church, VA: American Council of Learned Societies, 1993), p.21.

