

**"COMMUNICATIONS WITH/IN ASIA":  
THE ASIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA 'S  
20TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE**

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National Library of Australia

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA)'s Biennial Conference was held at La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria from 8-11 July 1996. The theme of "Communications with/in Asia" covered many aspects of communications, with interesting discussion of topics including publishing, electronic sources and the Internet.

By ASAA standards the 1996 biennial conference was very large with some 700 academics, students, researchers, journalists and librarians attending. More librarians attended than in past years, which is encouraging. They included Magdalen Lee of the University of Sydney Library, Bick-har Yeung and Michelle Hall of the University of Melbourne Library, Chooi-Hon Ho, Dennis Kishere, Eiko Sakaguchi and Jung Sim Kim of Monash University Library, Pam Longley of la Trobe University, Marie Sexton and Andrew Gosling from the National Library.

ASAA 1996 was well organised both by La Trobe academic staff, led by the eminent South Asianist Professor Robin Jeffrey, and the Conference Secretariat, Waldren Smith Management. This was the first time ASAA had employed a professional organiser, and the results were clearly positive.

**Plenary sessions**

In an interesting departure from previous ASAA practice both keynote speakers were eminent Australian non-academic writers with strong links to Asia.

The well-known Australian journalist Murray Sayle, who has lived in Japan for twenty years and writes regularly for the *New Yorker*, gave an eloquent and wide-ranging address on contemporary Japanese social and religious developments focussing on the notorious Aum Supreme Truth sect and its leader Shoko Asahara. Sayle believed that Aum (which incorporated Judaeo-Christian elements including notions of Armageddon) appealed to young and educated Japanese seeking a more spiritual and charismatic faith than the mainstream Shinto and Buddhist religions, which had become highly formalistic.

The second plenary speaker was the Tasmanian author Christopher Koch who recently won the Miles Franklin award for his latest novel *Highways to a War* set during the Vietnam conflict. He spoke about the strong influence of Asia on his writing and read passages from several of his

works. During questions he stressed that, 'though based on the experiences of Australian reporter Neil Davis and other Western journalists, *Highways to a War* is fictional.

### **Academic sessions**

There were generally six or seven concurrent sessions at any one time, divided into the categories: China and Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines, Japan, Mainland Southeast Asia, South Asia, the President's Stream and Economic and Comparative.

### **Satellite Communication**

Brian Shoemsmith of Edith Cowan University presented a paper with the arresting title "No Sex! No Violence! No News!" This stemmed from the ABC television program of the same name about satellite and other television in China. He believed the ABC program had been too deterministic in its "control/submission" model of the relationship between the Chinese government and viewers. The central government is not all powerful, and regional authorities do not necessarily follow central directives. Media workers are becoming more professional and less inclined to produce propaganda. Chinese television is developing for differentiated audiences, such as sports viewers, youth and women. Commercial cable television is expanding. The 1993 prohibition on satellite reception had some support in China because of fears of domination by foreign media interests.

### **Publishing, Asia and the Electronic Age**

This was an informative roundtable chaired by South Asia scholar Professor Frank Conlon of the University of Washington.

The well-known Australian writer and freelance journalist Hamish Macdonald who has lived in India for the last five years described his plans to establish a new Asia-related magazine, along the lines of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Initially he intended to produce this in India; but, because of government restrictions on foreign involvement in the media, he now believes Australia would be a more economic and stable base. He also mentioned that the Internet has really taken off in India within the last year, despite communications difficulties leading to very slow response times. There is a huge demand and many computer literate people.

Barbara Metcalf of the University of California, Davis, described how the University of California Press (UCP), the largest academic publisher in America has severely cut publication of scholarly monographs. While East Asian titles are still being produced, UCP is issuing virtually none on South Asia, Southeast Asia or the Middle East, as the market for such monographs including libraries has declined drastically. UCP is looking at

electronic alternatives, but is still undecided on how to proceed. During questions there was a lively discussion on the future of academic publishing, peer review, quality control and censorship on the Internet.

Cassandra Pybus of the electronic journal *Australian Humanities Review* discussed issues relating to electronic publishing. She stressed that production of an electronic journal is not cheap and that nobody is making money from such ventures. There is much work involved in creating links and the need for a professional editor/publisher. She did not see it as appropriate to put entire lengthy articles on the Web. There was considerable discussion of how electronic publishing would change the way academics and others write and do research.

### **Australian Reporting of Asia**

Three eminent veteran writers on Asia, Dennis Warner, Creighton Burns and Bruce Grant, talked about their experiences as Australian journalists reporting on Asia in the 1960s. Common themes to emerge included the difficulties of understanding the complexities of the period, for example, in Vietnam. Creighton Burns was concerned that future historians might put too much credence on newspaper reports written at the time which at best told only half the story. All three agreed that reporting during the 1960s was heavily influenced by the Cold War. It was a turbulent and eventful era when reporters were busy covering day to day happenings with little time for analysis. Dennis Warner pointed out that Australian media interest in Asia was not a recent phenomenon. He had started reporting from Singapore in the early 1950s. During questions there was discussion on the extent and nature of media censorship and self-censorship, particularly in the Vietnam War.

### **Korea**

Adrian Buzo of Monash University spoke about prospects for economic reform in North Korea. Despite its serious problems of economic decline exacerbated by recent natural disasters, he did not accept Western reports that the North was on the point of collapse. Kim Jong Il was firmly in control and continuing his father's Stalinist policies with the support of the political and military élite. Beyond minor reforms aimed at propping up the current system there was little immediate prospect of major economic change.

Sally Yea of Monash described the serious regional disparities resulting from rapid economic growth in South Korea. Seoul and the southeast of the country have benefited at the economic and political expense of the southwest provinces of Cholla.

John Mackay of Monash looked at recent South Korean attempts to move away from the long-standing economic dominance of large conglomerates (chaebol) as part of restructuring since the mid-1980s. He was not

optimistic of a fundamental change to greater participation by smaller enterprises.

### **Hands-on Asia**

David Dowling of the University of Western Australia presented the newly published *Contemporary Asia: a research guide* (1996), prepared for the advanced undergraduate and postgraduate student. Part 1 is a step-by-step guide to doing a research project on Asia from designing the project and doing library research to writing the paper, while Part 2 provides details of the most important source materials on contemporary Asia, including major reference works, journals, media and electronic sources.

Stephen Morgan has been one of the pioneers in Australia of using the Internet to teach about Asia. During the past year in Economic History at the University of Melbourne he has used the Web to administer and teach two courses, an advanced subject on Chinese business and economy and a first year introduction to the Asian economies. He demonstrated an online Web-based tutorial package for use by students to assess their own progress in the course. His Web pages are at

<http://www.ecom.unimelb/edu.au/bdchwww/>

### **Politics of Community in Modern China**

John Fitzgerald of La Trobe University and Pauline Keating of Victoria University, New Zealand, looked at different aspects of cooperative movements in China during the 1930s and 1940s. Fitzgerald saw the state-sponsored network of credit, production and transport cooperatives in the major southern province of Guangdong in the 1930s as important in the extension of government authority over arbitrary local power, and thus part of the development of the modern Chinese nation. Keating compared Chinese Communist Party and non-communist cooperative experiments in northwest China in the 1930s and 1940s. Both were based on similar visions of "new villages" where all aspects of life were organised cooperatively and democratically, and both faced similar problems of under-capitalisation, poor leadership, low skills levels, inadequate transportation and wartime inflation.

### **Annual General Meeting of ASAA**

In her Presidential address, Professor Beverley Hooper of the University of Western Australia referred to ASAA's ongoing and valuable cooperation with libraries through the National Roundtable on Libraries and Asia process, and drew attention to the successful implementation of the National CJK System.

## Library matters

### Korean Studies Association of Australasia Meeting

A number of librarians as well as Korean studies scholars attended this meeting which discussed progress since the March 1996 Korean Collecting Meeting (described in the May 1996 *EALRGA Newsletter*), particularly on possible funding for a survey of Korean research needs and information trends.

### Library panel

Warren Horton, Director-General of the National Library, was lead speaker at the well-attended library panel. He stressed the National Library's continued support for Asian collections and services, the importance of World 1 and the National CJK Project, and of electronic resources.

Dr Lewis Lancaster of the University of California Berkeley raised international issues relating to the digitisation of Asian materials. He urged the adoption of standards reflecting the needs of scholars rather than computer professionals, and also international co-operation. He proposed that ASAA, the National Library and others join an endeavour of the US-based Association of Asian Studies to avoid duplication in the production of electronic versions of fundamental texts such as the Buddhist canon through an international network of authoritative bodies to list and register the various digitised versions. Following the library panel, Professor John Maguire of Curtin University chaired a special meeting which further discussed Australian involvement in Dr Lancaster's proposed network.

The other speakers were: Rob Hurlle of the Coombs Computing Centre, ANU, who was standing in for Susan Prentice, and spoke about the ANU's project with the National Library of China (the site is at <http://www.nlc.go.cn>); Dr Helen Jarvis, head of the library school at the University of New South Wales, on major projects in which she has been involved - BISA, the Vietnamese Union Catalogue and the Cambodian genocide project; and Ian Dawes, Project Officer, South Asia Project, Curtin University on the South Asia Project.

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