

EAST ASIAN LIBRARY RESOURCES GROUP OF AUSTRALIA

Newsletter No. 56 (July 2010)

Asian Studies Association of Australia, 18th Biennial Conference, University of Adelaide, 5-8 July 2010

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Andrew Gosling and Michelle Hall at the ASAA Librarian's Table
Photo: Courtesy of Ms Di Ouyang

It is encouraging to see that the ASAA is clearly thriving, with over 370 registrants at its latest conference. Having attended every ASAA conference since 1986, my impression is that there is a trend towards a greater stress on the two most populous Asian states, China and India. In earlier years Indonesia played a stronger role in the conferences.

The conference was opened by the Lt Governor of South Australia, Mr Hieu Van Le, AO. He has been recognised for his services to the Australian Securities and Investments Commission and to multiculturalism, a considerable feat for someone who arrived by boat as a refugee from Vietnam in 1977. This was the first time Adelaide had hosted the ASAA conference since 1984.

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The eminent Australian diplomat, Mr John McCarthy, AO, gave a thought-provoking opening address on "Australia, Asia and public diplomacy". He based his remarks on his own experiences and recent opinion polls about perceptions of other countries. What was worrying in the polls was that while European and North American countries have an overwhelmingly positive image of Australia, Asian states, or at least those people polled, are less enthusiastic particularly on perceived race issues. McCarthy said polls taken in Australia showed that Australians have a very high opinion of their own country. In many ways that is a good thing but the down side is Australian complacency and ignorance of other countries. He mentioned Australia's recent problems with India over its students here, as in part reflecting these matters.

The liveliest panel I attended was entitled "China's Confucius Institutes around the world: soft power push or conspiracy?". It was highly unusual, as in effect the audience took over the session, and was more interested in questions and discussion than the rather bland presentations. There are now well over 200 Confucius Institutes in 88 countries around the world, a remarkable growth in a relatively short time. Most Australian universities with Chinese studies contain Confucius Institutes, though some such as the Australian National University are still considering whether to have one. Academics involved with the scheme were generally positive about the way China is prepared to be very flexible on the structure and content of these joint ventures between Chinese and Australian tertiary bodies. The focus of Confucius Institutes in Australia ranges from Chinese language teaching to traditional Chinese medicine. Scholars were less enthusiastic about the quality of volunteer teachers, mostly postgraduates, sent from China as part of the scheme. Concerns were also expressed that Australian universities might be compromising their academic freedom by accepting Chinese support, especially on issues sensitive to the Chinese government, such as Tibet.

The "India's Look East Policy" roundtable was also lively and informative. It was organized by the eminent India scholar, Professor Robin Jeffrey, formerly at La Trobe University then the Australian National University, and now at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore. The speakers included academics from Singapore and Australia as well as prominent South Asians such as the former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. The first session of the roundtable, which I was unable to attend was on India and Southeast Asia. The second was on India and East Asia, particularly China and Japan, both of which have not enjoyed easy relationships with their South Asian neighbour. Purnendra Jain, Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Adelaide, who was convenor of this ASAA conference, pointed out that while India has long wanted to strengthen ties with Japan, the Japanese showed little interest in India until quite recently. Professor Pradeep Taneja, an Australian expert on China, described the weakness of ties between India and China until relatively recently. He said that when he went to study in China in the 1980s he was one of only three Indian citizens studying there. Today over 6,000 Indian students go to China each year. He and other speakers stressed the huge differences in political systems and media freedom

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between Asia's two giants. At the conclusion of the session Robin Jeffrey referred back to John McCarthy's opening address and the problems of Australian complacency and ignorance of its neighbours. He compared Australia unfavourably with Singapore, whose Institute of South Asian Studies has no counterpart in this country.

As at the 2008 ASAA in Melbourne there was a librarians' table manned throughout the conference, and this seemed to be highly successful again. It was a pity that while there were three staff from the National Library, Anya Dettman, Di Ouyang and Mayumi Shinozaki, as well as Amy Chan from the Australian National University Library and Michelle Hall from the University of Melbourne Library, other major collections were not represented.

The ASAA conference was well organized, and it was good having the beautiful old Bonython Hall as its centre.

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