

Visit to Nalanda University, Rajgir, Bihar State, India, 25-29 November

by Darrell Dorrington

I visited the newly re-established [Nalanda University](#) in Rajgir, Bihar and was privileged to address the staff and students at the university on the topic "The Role of the Librarian from an Australian perspective – and Researching East Asia on a Budget". I described the structure and organization of the library at the Australian National University as I had experienced it and outlined the main principles for collection development, reader education and outreach as they were practiced during my tenure. I also described the challenges of a librarian in a research-intensive institution and outlined my philosophy with regards client services and collection development. I then went on to discuss strategies whereby an individual (or an institution) with limited resources might maximize their own or their institution's access to information resources to support their research and teaching goals. The session was followed by questions from the floor.

For those interested in East Asia, and Buddhism in general, it is interesting to note that the original Nalanda Buddhist centre of learning [or university] was the site where the Chinese monk Xuan Zang spent an extended period first of all learning the Buddhist classics, then teaching them for some time, before returning to China with the texts, to translate them and to re-invigorate the Buddhist faith in that country and consequently throughout East Asia in general. The original Nalanda was a centre of learning from the 5th century to about the 12th century CE before it fell into ruins.

The re-established university celebrated its 2nd annual Foundation Day while I was there and we were agreeably entertained by the renowned Indian fusion band "[Indian Ocean](#)". My visit also coincided with the opening of the International Rajgir Festival at which the Chief Minister of Bihar State, Nitish Kumar, spoke glowingly and supportively of the new university, promising his wholehearted support and also outlining his hopes that the university could capitalize on its historical roots and lead a re-focusing both physically and intellectually on the ancient religious, cultural and international connections of the area.

The current re-established university is already in its 2nd iteration (originally it shared premises with the local bureaucracy then moved to the current temporary campus on the outskirts of Rajgir town). The final permanent campus is due to commence construction some time during 2016.

During my visit to the library, I was thrilled to see the private library of my old mentor, Dr. Ken Gardiner, which I had helped ship off from Canberra, handsomely housed in locked cabinets in the new Nalanda University library. Dr. Gardiner's library includes many volumes which are meticulously annotated (in typical Gardiner style with exhaustive charts on lineage and various other comments – including notes of Dr. Gardiner's own mentors, I suspect) and no doubt will form the basis for further post-graduate studies at some future date.

It was gratifying to see, also, beside Dr. Gardiner's library, the personal library of Professor Wang Gungwu (another ANU alumnus) also gifted to the University, and to know that with these two collections, the resources to support East Asian Studies and beyond is assured at the institution.

The Rajgir region itself is an ancient seat of government dating from many centuries BCE, and hosted the Buddha himself for a number of years. The Buddha was contemporaneous with some of the founders of the Jain religion and Rajgir hosted many meetings between the two. The mountains behind Rajgir were also reputedly witness to the first Buddhist congress which was convened shortly after the Buddha's death in an effort to gather up his teachings as recorded or recalled by many of his contemporaries and followers.

I was also privileged to visit the magnificent [Xuan Zang Memorial Hall](#), just a few kilometres from the University as well as the archaeological ruins of the original Nalanda Mahavihara [or monastery], both of which were valuable destinations in their own right.

The University also kindly arranged for me to visit the nearby city of [Gaya](#), site of the World Heritage [Mahabodhi Temple](#), reputed site of the Buddha's enlightenment, replete with the (reputedly fourth generation) Bodhi tree. Nearby sites were also visited, including the Sujata Garh, a stupa marking the site of the residence of the maiden Sujata who apparently mistakenly bowed down at the feet of the Buddha, thinking the emaciated form of the fasting Buddha to be a tree, asking to be blessed with a son. When she realized her mistake, Sujata offered the Buddha milk rice, thus restoring him to health and teaching him a valuable lesson about balance in terms of life and spirituality.

The nearby Daibutsu or Great Buddha Statue was also a standout, as were the many different temples erected in the area by the pilgrims from all across the globe.

Of interest to China scholars is also perhaps the pass cut single-handedly by the lowly caste Dashrath Manjhi through the treacherous Gehlour Ganj mountain range which separated his impoverished village of Atri from the fields that he and his fellow-villagers tilled for the landlords on the other side of the range. Dashrath, the star of a recent Indian movie, reputedly single-handedly cut a pass through the range, thus ensuring safe and easy travel between his village and the valley beyond, reminding me of the Chinese legend of the "Foolish old man who moved mountains".

While there was a steady stream of visitors to all the sites above, I have no doubt that that number will grow exponentially if and when the Indian government finds itself able to construct decent roads to link up all the different points of interest.

I am grateful to the management and staff of Nalanda University for their hospitality and generosity towards me during my stay and trust that my visit will inspire others to consider supporting such a worthy project and perhaps even to visit such an inspiring area.



University logo



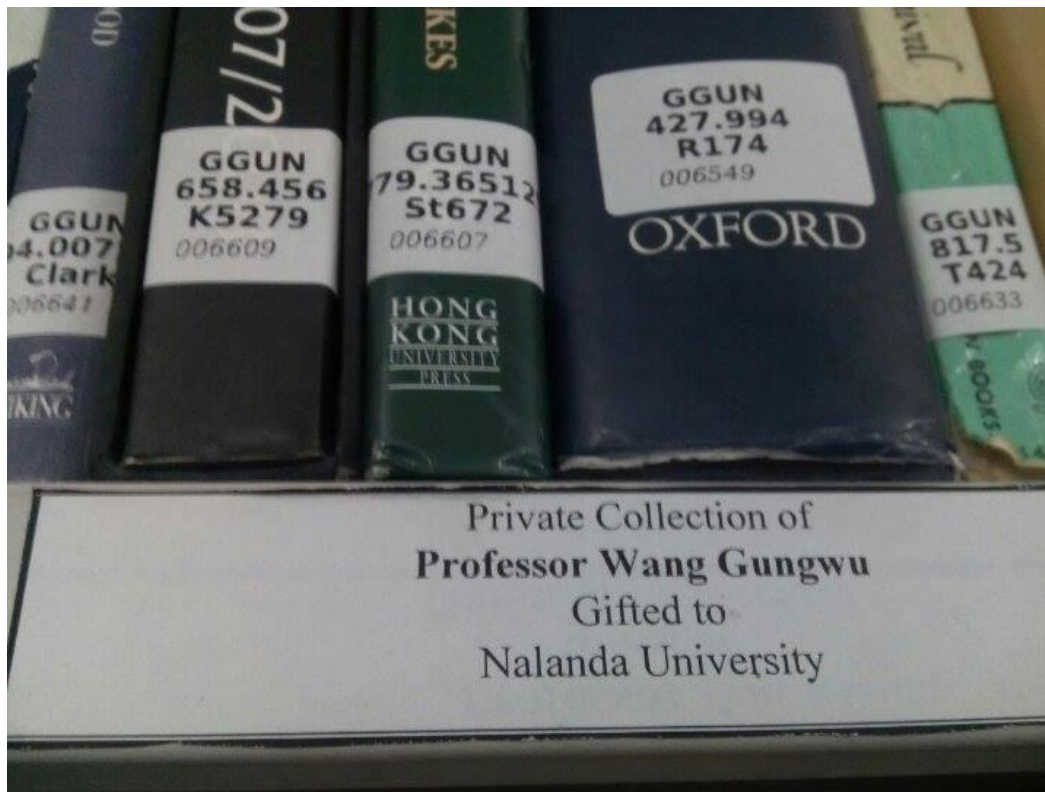
(Second) temporary campus



Talk to university staff and students



The superbly housed Ken Gardiner library at Nalanda University with deputy librarian Raj K Bhardwaj



Private collection of Prof. Wang Gungwu at Nalanda



A corner of the Nalanda library



Students, staff and guests are entertained by the Mumbai-based rock group “Indian Ocean”



Ancient Nalanda university ruins where Xuan Zang would have once studied and taught



Xuan Zang memorial hall, Rajgir



World Heritage listed Mahabodhi Temple, Gaya



(Reputed fourth generation) Bodhi tree and pilgrims at the Mahabodhi Temple, Gaya



The Daibutsu at Gaya



The Sujata Garh stupa with international pilgrims



The “Foolish Old Man” Gehlour Ganj pass cut single-handedly by the lowly Dashrath Manjhi