

Asian Studies in Australia Today: A Tale of Woe or Waiting for the Next Wave?

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This report covers the 21st Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) held at the Australian National University, Canberra from 5-7 July 2016. I have been attending ASAA conferences since 1986, and have missed only one in the last 30 years. In all that time I have not experienced a conference held under such difficult circumstances. The ANU is in the process of shedding many of the staff in the School of Culture, History and Language (CHL) at the College of Asia and the Pacific. One of the conference co-convenors, Professor Robert Cribb, an internationally renowned Indonesian historian, has only had his dismissal reversed after a major campaign and petitions to the ANU Vice-Chancellor. Others are still fighting to retain their jobs.

Many conference participants wore a gold square to support Asian Studies and oppose the cuts at ANU and elsewhere in Australia. At the welcome reception on 4 July when the Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific, Professor Veronica Taylor began her address, a number of students booed and walked out, while at the end Professor Howard Dick, an Indonesia scholar at the University of Newcastle, called on her to explain the cuts to CHL which she had overseen.

At least two of the sessions directly addressed the current difficulties faced by Asian Studies in Australia. The plenary session was entitled “The state and future of Asian Studies.” Two of the speakers, Prof. Louise Edwards, President of the ASAA and Professor of Chinese History at the University of New South Wales, and Prof. Tessa Morris-Suzuki of the ANU, an acclaimed historian of modern Japan and Korea, were pessimistic about the future, given the latest cuts at ANU on top of many other reductions around the country. Prof. Kent Anderson, now Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Western Australia, and a former Dean of Asian Studies at ANU, acknowledged that much was bad and ugly in the current situation, but urged scholars to be more positive and look for solutions. During questions Howard Dick likened Asian Studies in Australia to a surfer who has successfully ridden several waves, but is now in a deep trough waiting for the next wave.

There was also a panel entitled “Crisis at ANU: what happened to South East Asian history and culture?” Three eminent ANU scholars addressed this topic. Prof Tony Reid, a leading historian of South East Asia, traced the rise of ANU to become the pre-eminent centre for research on this region in Australia, and its subsequent loss of that position. Prof. Jim Fox, former head of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) stated that the merger of RSPAS with the Faculty of Asian Studies to form CAP in 2010 led to the loss of expertise in many areas, such as Asian geography, anthropology and an even greater decline in Pacific Studies. Prof. Robert Cribb described the current cuts at ANU which are falling most heavily (though not exclusively) on South East Asian history and culture. This panel was packed out with many participants standing. Questions and comments widened the concern to reductions at other universities and the study of other parts of Asia.

It was encouraging that there was a two part panel on Asian Studies and its research material, chaired by Dr Amy Chan of ANU. The twin sessions were held before and after lunch on the first day of the conference and were well attended by scholars and librarians. As a number of librarians attended these sessions and it is scheduled to be reported separately in a Newsletter Special Edition shortly, I will only touch on a few themes. Prof. Cribb pointed out the challenge for libraries as Asian Studies research increasingly stresses theory and puts less emphasis on a deep knowledge and understanding of an Asian culture than in the past. He also said many young scholars are shunning traditional print materials for purely electronic data. Dr Vannessa Hearman of the University of Sydney talked about Asian Studies acquisitions and raised concerns about approval plans leading to university libraries having very similar collections of mainly English language materials. Dr Aline Scott-Maxwell of Monash University Library spoke about pressures on the traditional system of language and area studies specialists in libraries, and how with the loss of Chinese and Japanese experts Bick-har Yeung and Michelle Hall at the University of Melbourne Library, the two Victorian universities are sharing Chinese and Japanese library positions on a trial basis. Dr Amrita Malhi of the University of Adelaide said that Australian libraries are unwilling to collect vulnerable Asian ephemera such as Malaysian election materials. There was considerable discussion arising from this, and the two following presentations by Amy Chan on digitising research resources and Dipin Ouyang of the National Library on web-archiving. Dr Robin Jeffrey, a respected India specialist, mentioned that he knows of a number of important scholars' manuscript collections which should be preserved. It was suggested that a preliminary list of such resources be collated as a first step in deciding on priorities, given the costs and labour involved in digitisation

Despite the difficult circumstances under which it was held, the conference was well organised by its convenors Dr Ed Aspinall and Dr Robert Cribb and their team. It revealed at least some positive signs for the future among all the tales of woe. Not all is doom and gloom. A number of bright young scholars and postgraduate students attended, showing that Asian Studies scholarship is by no means dying. Despite the ANU's cuts, the university has recently appointed Dr Yuri Takahashi to teach Burmese. At the library panel she commended the National Library and ANU Library Burmese language collections. Several academics made the point that Asian Studies practitioners have helped make the Australian public as a whole much more knowledgeable about Asia than was the case a few decades ago. As Prof. Campbell Macknight of ANU remarked to me, "we have won the war" on this. He stated that you only have to compare the average Australian with the average European. The latter knows far less about Asia than Australians do. During the plenary session Prof. Kent Anderson mentioned that he has just joined the Council of the National Library of Australia. He said he is keen to promote a national approach to Asian Studies library collecting, especially given the negative impact of the so-called efficiency dividend cuts on the National Library and other national cultural institutions as well as cutbacks by university libraries.