IIAS is pleased to collaborate with the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) who have collected a number of highlights “fresh from Southeast Asia” presented on this page and the next. The coordinator for this collection is Jayati Bhattacharya. We hope to provide a similar news service from other regions of Asia in future issues of the Newsletter.

Report on the conference Inter-Asian Connections II

FOLLOWING UP ON THE 2008 Inter-Asian Connections conference inaugurated in Dubai, Inter-Asian Connections II was held in Singapore from 8-10 December 2010. It will be followed by Inter-Asian Connections III in Hong Kong in 2012. The Singapore event sustained the excitement evinced in the first event of exploring new frontiers of research in the connections, convergences and comparisons among societies in Asia.

The organizers of the series are the Asia Research Institute (ARI) and The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Division (HSS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS), The Hong Kong Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (HKHSS) at the University of Hong Kong, and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) of New York. Scholars came from Asia, Europe, Australia and America to present papers and discuss the continuities, discontinuities and new connections that increasingly traverse the region. The event was organized into five two-day workshops, with several plenary sessions including a keynote speech, presentation of workshop goals and findings, and a special session to honor the 80th Birthday of Professor Wang Gungwu, doyen of China-Southeast Asia scholarship and Professor at NUS. The five workshops and their chairs were:

• Regional Knowledge Hubs in Asia: the Social Sciences and Humanities in Science and Technology Human Capital – V.V. Krishna (NUS) and Tim Turpin (University of Western Sydney)
• Inter-Asian Temples and Trust Networks within and out of Southeast Asia – Kenneth Dean (McGill University)
• How Asia Became Territorial – Itty Abraham (University of Western Sydney) and Seong Tan (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies)
• Reproduction Migration in Asia – Biao Xiang (University of Oxford) and Mika Toyoda (NUS)
• Old Histories, New Geographies: Contrapuntal Mobilities of ‘heritage’ and Singapore

The keynote address was delivered by Prof. Ashok Ahbas of the University of California, Irvine. He spoke on the topic of “Post Theory” and Asian Cultural Practices’, which addressed the relation contemporary Asia between disciplinary spaces – anachronisms, the confusion of progressive and retrograde, the dislocation of local and specific – and cultural practices like cinema, architecture, performances, and theory itself. Other plenary sessions dealt with ‘Electronic Media and Academic Interaction among Scholars in Asia’ with presentations by Paul H. Kratoska, NUS Press and Michael Duckworth, Hong Kong University Press, and ‘A Curriculum Developing and Developing’ research projects, where workshop leaders Xiang Biao, Itty Abraham and Emeng Ho discussed the curriculum they have developed and taught on Asian connections and convergences in their home institutions.

The conference was deemed very successful by the participants. One observed that when academic research is forced to ‘follow the model of the fast factory, such…intellectually intensive event is particularly welcomed’. Another noted that “[t]he interdisciplinary mix in our own workshop [is] instructive and stimulating, bringing some new insights”. Indeed, several reports express the desire to take back insights gained from exchanges with participants in other workshops to the plenary sessions to further explore these problems in their own workshops. We hope that these questions can be pursued in many subsequent events that register the re-emergence of an interdependent, transnational Asian consciousness.

Conference details are available at http://www.ssrc.org/pages/conference-on-inter-asian-connections-singapore-december-8-10-2010

Prasenjit Duara
National University of Singapore, Singapore
ppd@nus.edu.sg

The latest addition in this venture is a privately owned but government endorsed enterprise: the state of the art ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands Casino which was opened by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 17 February 2011. The following day, the Foreign Minister of Singapore and patron of the exhibition, George Yeo inaugurated a running display of Thai treasures acquired from the Belitung shipwreck entitled “Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds.” The fascinating collection of artifacts, including magnificent ceramics, brought to light historically significant cross-cultural exchanges dating back to ninth century C.E. Almost concurrently, two other exhibitions, “Travelling the Silk Roads: Ancient Pathways to the Modern World” and “Gangheta Khan: The Exhibition” were opened to the public.

In its recent efforts to promote an increasing number of local and international exhibitions in the city, the government has sponsored several of the projects. The major exhibitions open in 2011 were “Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds” and “Shipwrecked: Treasures from the South China Sea.”

Kerdonnel Khmer Group

ADOPTING THE SLOGAN ‘Together We Can Protect’, young Cambodian researchers and foreign colleagues who are passionate about Cambodian culture and heritage, formed a group called KDNNK or Kerdonnel Khmer (Kerhmer Heritage) in 2009. The group’s main purpose is to spread information about Cambodian and Southeast Asian culture to Cambodians through various media such as the KDNNK’s website, newsletter and magazine. The group aims to document all activities related to the preservation and conservation of Cambodian culture and heritage.

Kerdonnel Khmer – Magazine of Arts and Archaeology, is a result of the hard work of Cambodian students, professors, professional artists from the fields of arts, archeology, history, culture, tourism and journalism. KDNNK intends to protect and spread Cambodian culture and civilization, which have had a long and glorious history, and to make them known both in Cambodia and abroad. KDNNK especially encourages Cambodians to understand the value of their national cultural heritage and protect it in the spirit of three important slogans. ‘If culture fades away, the nation is destroyed’, ‘Destroying culture is destroying national identity’, and ‘Preserving culture is preserving the national soul’. With Kerdonnel Khmer Magazine’s first issue, KDNNK received letters of appreciation from His Majesty King Norodom Shihanouk, king of Cambodia, and Prime Minister Hun Sen, as well as His Excellency Him Chhem, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts.

In 2010, KDNNK started a new project, The recording of the past … throughout the French Protectorate Building in Cambodia, providing research opportunities to both local and foreign students of archeology and art history. Ten young archeological students have been volunteering with KDNNK. The group plans to organize conferences on Cambodian culture, history, epigraphy, arts, music, photography, architecture, tourism and other related areas. These activities will be held in selected local institutions and organizations in cooperation with the Royal University of Fine-Arts, Bophana Centre and IT Center.

KDNNK cooperates with both local and international institutes such as IT Center, Bophana Center, Ecole Francais d’Extreme-Orient, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, University of Surbonne Nouvelle-Paris III and Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre (ISEAS). In 2011, the group established the KDNNK Foundation to promote the preservation and conservation of Khmer culture and heritage.

Chen Chanratan<br>chanratan@yahoo.com<br>University of Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris III, France

UNIVERSISTE DE PROVENCE, 3, PLACE VICTOR-HUGO, 13003 MARSEILLES, FRANCE

Ph.: 33-(0)413550723 - Fax: 33-(0)413550727 - E-mail: moussons@univ-provence.fr

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Publications de l’Université de Provence 29, avenue Robert Schuman, 13000 Aix-en-Provence, France
Ph.: 33-(0)442953191 – Fax.: 33-(0)442953180
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Local History, from the Outside

The overarching theme of the workshop “Local History, from the Outside: Using Foreign Sources in Asian History” held by the University of Tokyo from 11-12 December 2010, was to explore the possibilities of using European language sources for writing Asian history from a local perspective. It envisaged opening new approaches in the conventional historiography on Japan as practiced by domestic historians. Bringing together scholars from different countries and various fields of research, the workshop intended to look at reactions and transformations of local societies from a global perspective.

Three sessions were chaired by Patrizia Caroti (I’Orientali, University of Naples). The first session dealt with trade and exchange in South and Southeast Asia. Ioka Naoko (SEAS, Singapore) explored the role of Dutch-Era trading in Southeast Asia from the 17th and 18th centuries, while Shimada Ryuto (Seinan Gakuin University, Fukuoka) examined the economics of gift exchange between the Dutch East India Company and the court of Ayutthaya. Eric Tagliacozzo (Cornell University) discussed the narcotics trade in insular Southeast Asia through the ‘long nineteenth century’.

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