

IAFOR

The Fourth Asian Conference on Cultural Studies

The Asian Conference on Asian Studies

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After taking a ship from Korea - complete with kitsch magic show and karaoke - I arrived in the port of Osaka for the 4th annual Asian Conference Cultural Studies. This was my first time in Japan, and my first time attending an international conference, so I was eager to get the most out of the experience. The following day, I took a tour of Osaka with about 12 other conference attendees: which featured temples guardians, castle fortifications and delicious seafood balls from busy street stalls.

That evening I attended the conference's unofficial opening drinks. We were subjected to a rather bombastic taiko performance. Taiko is a kind of highly energetic traditional Japanese drumming. The drummers passionately pounded the skins of their drums and tried to elicit crowd participation from the room full of academics, most of who stiffly stood there. A barrel of sake was smashed open with ceremonial hammers, and the conference attendees were encouraged to ritualistically drink a glass.

The conference started in earnest the following morning, being kicked off with three keynote presentations. These presenters encouraged curiosity, compassion and humility, which I think set the tone for the kind of space we wanted to make at this conference. The first parallel panel I went to showcased the diversity of the conference. The chair introduced the first speaker who presented a media studies paper on eco-warriors in the neoliberal age; the second speaker presented a psychoanalytical interpretation of the Egyptian revolution; and the third an international relations analysis of the rise of China.

That evening, most of the conference participants wandered along the river to a restaurant for the official conference dinner. This all-you-can-eat, all-you-can-drink affair followed a division of consumption, with the meat eaters, fish eaters and vegetarians being split up accordingly.

Over the next two days I went to as many presentations as possible. I was a little nervous before giving my paper, although - judging from the positive feedback I received - I think it went fairly well. I even succeeded in scaring a few people with my discussion of cybernetic capitalism, which I took as a good sign. Then, after what seemed to be simultaneously a long and short time, the conference ended. Perhaps most valuable were the conversations that surrounded and interpenetrated the conference. Catching up with old friend and making new ones.

After the conference, I went on another tour organised by the IAFOR - the conference organisers, who I must say, were very well organised - this time to the old capital, Kyoto. It is an amazing city. Parts of the city have somehow managed to subordinate the dictates of high modernism to an alternate aesthetic. Some streets embodied a complex mishmash of pre-modern, modern and post-modern sensibilities, with a vibrant contemporary-traditional atmosphere.

I decided to stay on in Kyoto after the tour, and the next day, after visiting yet another temple, I was walking along path by a shady creek called the 'Philosopher's Way'. Halfway along the amble through warm mottled sunlight, I randomly met someone from the conference. We went and had lunch together in a bear themed café, and ordered lunch, which came out sculpted into bear form. We continued a great conversation which went into on ideology, linguistic philosophy and various cultural perceptions of nature. This conversation sprawled out of lunch occupied the rest of the day and evening. This intellectually engaging conversation, which began on the Philosopher's Way, seemed an appropriate ending to what was a very enjoyable conference experience.