

## **Report on the 2014 ASAJ Conference: Transformation of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age**

The Australian Studies Association of Japan (ASAJ) commemorates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014. One of the events that mark and celebrate this feat took place in July: it was the First International ASAJ Conference, which also included the Sophia Symposium. Both events were held at Sophia University (Tokyo) on Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> July and the conference continued on Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> July.

Professor Fukushima, Professor Suzuki and Professor Arimitsu convened a stimulating gathering at a wonderful location. Upon arrival, a team of students welcomed us and led us to the 17<sup>th</sup> floor, where we could do the registration and meet other academics while enjoying the magnificent views. All the sessions had the possibility of simultaneous translation in English or Japanese and a copy of the plenary presentations was distributed among the audience. The opening session recalled the academic relations between Japan and Australia, and highlighted the creation of a chair in Australian Studies at the University of Tokyo, funded by Rio Tinto, and the fact that Japanese is the most studied foreign language in Australian schools.

Dr Susan Ballyn gave the first plenary lecture: “Historical Verticality versus Transversality”, where she disregarded the traditional belief of the homogeneity of the convicts who were transported to Australia and, thus, “the myth of the Founding Fathers/Mothers of White Australia being of British descent”. Dr Ballyn reminded the audience that Australia was multicultural long before the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She talked about multiculturalism in Indigenous Australian societies, in the convicts transported and introduced many facts about the existence of intercolonial transportation of convicts, such as the penal colony of Port Blair in an island near India. Then, Dr Ballyn focused on the Sephardic, Spanish, Portuguese and Hispanic convicts who were sent to Australia despite the fact that they were not British subjects, many did not speak English and usually did not live in England, although many times they were tried in England or any British dominion or colony. Dr Ballyn explained several case studies, such as those of Sephardic boxers Mendoza, the Jew, whose relatives were sent to Van Diemen’ s Land, and Samuel Belasco, who was transported; Gregorio Guinea and Lázaro Berrea, who had either no English or minimal English, were not provided a translator and were transported, when they should have been deported; or Adelaida de la **Toreza** de la Vega, whose biography was written and published after her death by Presbyterian clergyman James Cameron, and it took ten years of work for Dr Lucy Frost and Dr Susan Ballyn to differentiate what was true from what was not in the biography. Dr Ballyn finished her presentation talking about the Sephardim in Japan.

After this stimulating session, the Sophia Symposium took place. Titled “A New Wave of Media in a Multicultural Society”, the exchange was chaired by Dr Kate Darian-Smith, its participants were Dr Catriona Elder, Dr Baden Offord and Dr Takanobu Tanaka and it was followed by a lively debate.

In her talk “Recognising Aboriginal Publics: European Australians, Listening instead of Talking”, Dr Elder explained that Indigenous Australians are often stereotyped and spoken about and, in fact, fewer than 10% of non-Indigenous Australians mix with Indigenous Australians in their daily lives. Consequently, “Indigenous perspectives on race relations... need to be continually re-presented in order to re-inform an ignorant white public about the past”. For example, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some Indigenous Australians wrote petitions to Australian or British authorities to improve their living conditions, thus, they were informed of the political structures used by dominant Australians. Also, in 1946 three Indigenous Australians and a Euro-Australian began a strike to fight for their labour rights, which was followed by more than 700 workers, and had the support of trade union networks as they spread the news. Dr Elder also stated that the process of national reconciliation lived in the 1990s was based on a binary premise: that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples were “at odds and [needed] to repair or improve their relationship”. However, as Indigenous peoples had a better understanding of non-Indigenous peoples and systems, the reconciliation process became a “national education process” in which Indigenous peoples communicated their experiences to non-Indigenous peoples. Dr Elder finished her presentation talking about a current movement: the “Recognise Indigenous peoples” campaign and their suggestion of holding a referendum to change the constitution of Australia.

Dr Offord continued to develop the topic of belonging in his talk “Media Convergence and New Narrative of Belonging: Transformations in Australian Surf Culture”. Dr Offord explained that the way Australians relate to each other in the digital spheres affects Australian culture and society because “new ways of communication enable people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to be active participants in culture and society”. He introduced the concept of cultural citizenship and explained the relevance of the beach in the Australian psyche: from the place where Captain Cook landed and where the first encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples took place, to Gallipoli and the myth of the ANZACs, the Surf Life-Saving Club representing the heroism, civilization and masculinity of Australia, or even the Cronulla riots. He linked this narrative of identity, place and belonging to the digital age and the use of new media through an analysis of the short film *Between the Flags* – which was viewed- and the documentary *Out in the Line Up*, the result from an online project which tries to shed some light “at how lesbian and gay women and men who surf understand and experience surfing within the dominant heterosexually identified male surfing culture”. The project was started by French Australian gay surfer Thomas Castets, who created a website called [www.gaysurfers.net](http://www.gaysurfers.net) because he could not find a similar site to meet other gay surfers. The use of new media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Kickstarter and blogs allowed Castets to do his research and show that surf culture is not the “heterosexual, white male dominated, deeply homo-social and homophobic culture” that has been stereotyped.

In a moving presentation, Dr Takanobu Tanaka talked about “Broadcasting Disaster”. As a broadcast journalist, he covered several “national and man-made disasters such as the earthquake in Kobe, Japan (1995), 9.11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. (2001) and Indian Ocean tsunami disaster (2004) in Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka”, as well as the Great East Japan earthquake (2011), which was followed by a tsunami. Dr Tanaka explained that NHK is the only public broadcaster in Japan and that the birth of radio broadcasting had a double aim: to report the aftermath of a disaster and to disseminate information to prevent or reduce the damage. Dr Tanaka conducted a study to find out the difficulties foreigners living in Japan had experienced after the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 and, as a consequence, the service has introduced several improvements. For example, it uses stronger language to convey the urgency of the danger and the word “evacuate” is used more often. Also, the Network Listening Service checks new media sites, such as Twitter or Facebook, to search for “help” messages from individuals stranded. Furthermore, a new service directed to foreigners living in Japan has been created to help them be informed and know how to react to a disaster: NHK World. Finally, news is given in simple, easy Japanese, so foreigners with basic Japanese can understand them. Given the fact that a big earthquake is expected to hit Tokyo in less than 30 years, improving the service and anticipating difficulties is necessary to avoid confusion and help people when the time comes.

On Sunday, the first plenary session was “‘The space of nations is never simply their own’ : Hiroshima in Australian Literature”, delivered by Dr Brigitta Olubas. She analysed the representation of Hiroshima, and by extension the construction of Japan, in some texts written by Shirley Hazzard and Nam Le. Dr Olubas analysed Hazzard’s *The Transit of Venus* (1980), especially the character of the young hero, Ted Tice, who is “defined as a singular figure by his ethical choices, beginning with his response to Hiroshima”. Dr Olubas also analysed Hazzard’s memories of listening to the news of the bomb dropping and later of her experience of Hiroshima in April 1947, which she explained in an essay published in the *Boston Review* in 1981. Hazzard also recalled how an Australian friend visited her and her family in New York in 1981 and how he explained that he had been an injured soldier at the time the atomic bomb had been dropped. His unit was outnumbered by Japanese troops and he was sure he was to die. However, because the bomb was dropped and Japan surrendered, he was rescued and survived. This man shared his ambivalent position: “I never knew how to handle this in my mind: I wish the bomb had never been invented, let alone dropped. But if it had not been, I would be a rotting skeleton these thirty-odd years”. Dr Olubas also analysed John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946) and George Bataille’s review of Hersey’s book. After this, she introduced Nam Le’s story “Hiroshima”, told by 8 year-old Mayako who lives “in Hiroshima in the period leading up to the bombing”. She is separated from her family, not because of the bomb, but because of the war: her father and mother are at her home, her brother and sister are involved in military and citizens’ groups and she is sent away for safety. She recalls a day the family was taken a photo, a letter she

sends to her parents asking them to let her come back home and the moment when the atomic bomb was dropped. Le' s story, Dr Olubas argues, "enacts in these fragmented and repeated moments... a reflection on mediation and immediacy". Finally, Dr Olubas talked about the relevance of sound and intertextuality in this story.

The second plenary session was Dr David Lowe' s "Australian Colombo Plans: Old and New". In his fascinating presentation, Dr Lowe contrasted both plans: the "Old" Colombo Plan (1951-1970s), which called for South and Southeast Asian university students to spend some time in Australia, and the "New" Colombo Plan (2014), which aims at Australians spending some time studying at an Asian university and maybe doing a complementary internship. By giving the plan the same name, the Abbot government suggested that bilateral relations between countries are similar as they were 60 years ago. Dr Lowe recalled that PM Abbott referred to Japan as "our best friend in Asia" and that PM Abe declared "that the two countries were ' moving towards a new special relationship' ". I remembered that similar adjectives had been used to qualify the relationship between China and Australia in the 1980s. In 1984, when PM Hawke visited North East Asia, he said that Australia' s relationship with China was a " special relationship' ", and Premier Zhao Ziyang called it a " model relationship' " (Hou 345). Dr Lowe also explained that, by using the same name, the government set certain expectations on the future behaviour of those students who go on exchange programs, following the lessons of their predecessors. The three main outcomes drawn from the "Old" Colombo Plan include the facts that many of the "Asian students who studied in Australia during the 1950s to 1970s returned home and rose to positions of prominence in public life", that "a more general ' people-to-people' connectedness was forged, with lasting friendships and increases in mutual interest and awareness between Australians and citizens of Asian countries" and that this initiative was considered to be part of foreign policy. Dr Lowe studied the reasons why the personal experiences of international students have hardly been researched, introduced some of the studies done and their results, such as the role of community organisations and sponsorship in the experiences of international students. He concluded highlighting the possibilities of the "New Colombo Plan" for research and the work historians could do.

The parallel sessions on Saturday and Sunday covered a wide range of topics, mainly in the areas of migration and refugees studies; literary, political and social relations between Japan and Australia; Australia' s identity, Indigenous identity; and Australian Studies in different Asian countries. The parallel sessions I could attend were inspiring and thought-provoking and the participants skilfully replied to the many questions and comments the engaged audience asked. It was a pleasure to participate in the sessions.

The closing panel was a round table titled "The Future of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age". It was chaired by Dr David Walker and formed by Dr Masami Sekine, Dr Xiaoying Zhu, Dr Suphat Suphachalasai and Dr Susan Ballyn. Dr Walker explained that there exist 40 Australian Studies programs in China, explained some of the possibilities scholars could have there and announced two of the next conferences that will be hosted at Peking University: the 2<sup>nd</sup> FASIC Australian Studies in China

Conference, named “The Big Picture: Lives, Landscapes, Homelands in Australian and Chinese Art” in September 2014, and the biannual Chinese Australian Studies Association in July 2016. Dr Sekine reminded the audience that Australian Studies began in Japan in 1983 and recalled the many goals achieved these years. Dr Suphachalasai mentioned that there exists one Australian Studies Centre in Thailand and that 10 universities have joined their activities. He showed the website they have founded: [www.globalausstudy.org](http://www.globalausstudy.org), and asked to be sent information about publications and congresses. Dr Suphachalasai was also very generous as he invited all participants to the conference to let the Australian Studies Centre in Thailand know if we go to Bangkok, even if it’s just a stopover, because they would take the chance to organise an event, a talk or a presentation and speakers would be offered accommodation in return. The following speaker was Dr Zhu, who recalled some of the many topics dealt with in the conference and linked many of them in an impressive summary where she also noted how much she had enjoyed the conference. In her participation, Dr Ballyn presented the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona (Spain) and highlighted the need to develop further and better means of communication among the different Australian Studies Centres around the world. She also suggested making the most of the global media and find a way to link the different Australian Studies Centres’ websites, host information about the different Chairs in Australian Studies, etc A lively debate sprung and, after some suggestions made by Dr Walker, Dr Ballyn, Dr Darian-Smith and Dr Olubas, among others, Dr Suphachalasai offered to use their website to host all the international information that other Australian Studies Centres provided them and to host links to all the websites of the other centres, thus, becoming an information hub for Australian Studies. The great news was cheered and, less than two months after the congress, this is a reality.

The participants to the conference had many chances to interact with each other, not only at the breaks between sessions, but also at the welcome dinner on Saturday and lunch times on Saturday and Sunday. These occasions provided many opportunities to catch up with friends and meet other academics. The success of the congress was evident in the camaraderie of the participants and it was exemplified through the goodwill displayed to make an effort to share our passion with others and further our discipline: Australian Studies.

I am looking forward to the next conference! Arigatou gosaimasta!

Other works cited

Hou, Minyue. “The Post-Tiananmen Human Rights Issue in China-Australia Relations”.  
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