Summary of Round-table Discussion

"The Future of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age"

[Chair]
David Walker (BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University, China)

[Speakers]
Masami Sekine (Keio University, Former President of ASAJ, Japan)
Xiaoying Zhu (East China Normal University, China)
Suphat Suphachalasai (Thammasat University, Thailand)
Susan Ballyn (University of Barcelona, Spain).

Dr. David Walker began the Round Table by introducing the Foundation for Australian Studies in China (FASIC). FASIC is an independent non-profit foundation in Australia established to support Australian Studies Centres located across China and to provide funding and other support to the BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies located at Peking University in Beijing. FASIC is supported by the multinational mining company BHP Billiton. Walker added that a similar programme sponsored by another multinational metals and mining company, Rio Tinto, will be launched next year in Japan (the Rio Tinto Chair of Australia-Japan Studies at the University of Tokyo.)

Walker emphasized that unlike other bilateral organizations, which are under increasing financial pressure, FASIC continues to offer a funding base for various programmes with very little intervention from the sponsor, and serves as a means of cultural public diplomacy. Though is not directly related to their business, its educational programme is worthwhile in generating interest in Australia.

Walker then pointed out the need to break the bilateral framing of Australian Studies and bring Asian countries together. If we look forward over the next 30 to 40 years, he argued, Australia will be receiving more innovative discussion from the region (Asia) than from Europe, America or the UK, regions that have historically been important to Australia. In that sense, he continued, the ASAJ Conference is an interesting, worthwhile and innovative gathering, breaking the conventional bilateral framing and highlighting the regional dimension of Australian Studies.

Lastly, he announced two upcoming meetings scheduled to be held in China, and invited the Round Table participants to attend. The first is the Annual Australian Studies Conference supported by the Foundation for Australian Studies to be held in September 2014, and the second is the Chinese-Australian Studies Association’s biannual conference in July 2016 to be
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held at Peking University. Both conferences, though bilateral in nature, will attempt to tie in Australian studies programmes from across the region.

The four speakers of the Round Table then presented a report on their activities.

The first speaker, Dr. Masami Sekine, outlined the trends in Australian Studies in Japan, and the changes in Australia’s multiculturalism and the country’s relations with Asia over the past several decades.

In 1979, Sekine was asked by the Australia-Japan Foundation to develop Australian studies programmes and change Japan’s perception of Australia. This was a time when Australia was changing rapidly and becoming a multicultural country. Since then, the Australian policies of multi-culturalism and Australia’s relations with Asian countries have changed as the government had changed from Conservative to Labour, and back to Conservative. Sekine expressed concern that Australia, a forerunner of multiculturalism in a globalizing age, seems now running in a different direction. One example is that the Department of Immigration and Citizenship was renamed the Department of Immigration and Border Protection in 2013.

Sekine then offered his perspective that multiculturalism could survive only in democratic societies. He added that the revival of Australian official multicultural policy will facilitate the development of Australian studies in the future in Japan and elsewhere. He cited that FIFA World Cup as an example to how to make Asian people more aware that Australia is a part of Asia. (Australia has been a member of the Asian Football Confederation since 1996).

The second speaker Dr. Suphat Suphachalasai gave an outline of Australian Studies in Thailand conducted by the Australian Studies Centre at Thammasat University – the only centre in Thailand where Australian Studies have been conducted.

The Centre has two objectives. The first is to let the Thai people know more about Australia based on the belief that in a globalizing world, people need to know and understand more about their neighboring countries. Most recently, the Centre has undertaken a series of teacher-training conferences for high school teachers across various provinces of Thailand, in association with the International Cooperation Study Centre of Thammasat University. The second objective is to support research and academic programmes by holding seminars, workshops, lectures and events.

Suphachalasai stated that as an economist, he had few connections with scholars in other fields, but that the ASAJ conference has given him an opportunity to expand his network and join Australian study centres in other countries, and learn from their experiences. Lastly, he introduced his centre’s initiative: a website “GLOBAL AUSSTUDY – A Connecting Place for
Australian Studies Centres” developed for students of Australia from around the world (http://www.globalausstudy.org/index.php/about-us).

The third speaker, Dr. Xiaoying Zhu, gave a brief history of Australian literature in China. She noted that the study of Australian literature in China was pioneered by Dr. Huang Yuanshen, the first president of the Australia Studies Centre at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade in China. Dr. Huang was also the first president of the China Australia Studies Association. He translated many works of Australian literature into Chinese and wrote a textbook A History of Australian Literature published in 1997. Dr. Huang is the supervisor of active scholars in China, many of whom work in Shanghai.

Zhu stated that according to Dr. Huang, Australian literature studies in China started in the early 1950s, declined in the 1960s and 70s, but was revived after 1978 when China opened its doors again to the outside world, and interest in translation of Australian literature and critical writing by Australians grew. Currently there are three types of translated books sold in China: a) works of fiction with some connections with China personally or semantically, b) books that have been awarded prizes, and c) popular novels (e.g., works by Colleen McCullough).

Zhu then pointed out the strengthening relations between China and Australia. The number of Australian Studies centres has increased dramatically with the growth of economic and political relations between the two countries. China is Australia’s largest trading partner, surpassing Japan and even the United States. Many Chinese students go to Australia for further education and have a great desire to understand Australian culture. As a result, the Australian Studies in China is receiving as much attention as American Studies or British Studies, as demonstrated in the success of the 14th International Conference on Australian Studies. With the support and sponsorship of the Chinese government, Australian Studies has moved from the sidelines to centre field in China.

The last speaker was Dr. Susan Ballyn, who was involved in setting up Barcelona University’s Australian Studies Centre in 2000, the only one of its kind in the Mediterranean region. She outlined Australian studies in Europe. She pointed out a gap in enthusiasm between Australian Studies in Asia (very active) and Europe, and also a lack of communication and exchanges between east and west and north and south. In Europe, researchers and scholars tend to work in their own country; they may visit each other on a bilateral programme, but due to financial problems and other reasons multi-national networking is limited (one exceptional and successful example mentioned by Ballyn was the Crown Princess Mary Cancer Centre at Westmead Hospital in the suburb of Sydney funded by Denmark). There is much interest in Australia in Eastern Europe but their expectations have not been sufficiently met. She thus called for more networking and thanked ASAJ for organizing the conference this time, which is
a step in the right direction.

The subsequent discussions focused on ways to facilitate communication among Europe (both West and East), Asia, America and Australia itself on Australian Studies and to expand the network. The website introduced by Suphachalasai (“GLOBAL AUSSTUDY – A Connecting Place for Australian Studies Centres”) was welcomed as a promising base to build a global network of websites for use by scholars around the world. It was also suggested that an organization like InASA (The International Australian Studies Association) can serve as a clearing house, if given a sufficient support from other organizations. Walker closed the Round Table by again emphasizing that linkages are very important, and the 2014 ASAJ International Conference/Sophia Symposium was a step forward in stimulating dynamic relations.