

Konferenzbericht

THE 33rd ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION
FOR ASIAN STUDIES (AAS)⁺

Only by mass you touch the mass; for any
Will finally, himself, his bit select;
Who offers much, brings something unto many,
And each goes home content with the effect.

...

Grasp the exhaustless life that all Asians live!

Faust I

With apologies to Goethe for substituting a word the quote aptly describes what happens when the accumulated forces of North American Asian studies get together for their annual meeting, this year from March 13-15 in Toronto.

These annual meetings follow a well-tested, successful pattern. Participants were offered panels on all conceivable subjects, individual papers, the address of the association's president, an exhibition with books and other audio-visual material, a reception, and time for discussions and getting to know each other. Some figures give an idea of the dimensions involved: 65 sessions, about 430 active speakers (excluding panel chairpersons), and numerous committee meetings, most of them open to the general membership. About 45 publishing companies as well as other institutions exhibited their products. Catalogues and informations on recent and forthcoming publications were available.

A closer look at the sessions which comprised the program indicates the admirable balance of the whole Meeting. We can roughly divide the topics dealt with into a group A (Art, culture, language, literature and religion) and a group B (Social science, economics, history), with 26 sessions for cluster A and 30 for cluster B. Each category was comprehensive: topical issues, reports on ongoing research, and well-written, fruitful papers. The overall coverage also included "technical" issues such as tools, for example a session on new perspectives of East Asian librarianship. All in all, it impressively demonstrated the skillful planning and preparation of the annual meeting, for

⁺ I am grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for a grant which enabled me to attend the Meeting.

which this time the AAS staff had the assistance of Toronto based students and researchers.

The space for representation allotted to countries and regions was also awarded in a reasonable, appropriate, and fair manner. Although such classification is inexact - and many sessions dealt with more than one issue and country - for the record China led the list with 19 sessions, followed by India/South Asia (17), Southeast Asia (12), Japan (11), and Korea (3). The same balanced approach was applied to the selection of individual papers.

Some concrete examples may indicate the scope of subjects presented at the conference: agrarian social structure; temples as economic centres; urbanism, and rural unrest; Japan's energy options; modernization of China. Aspects of religion included: transformation of Buddhist concepts in Japanese thought; Buddhist meditations and visualizations; interpretation of death in Buddhist and Hindu traditions; South Asian Muslims and the Middle East; religion and society. For literature, language and art there were: the Tang poet and his society; Chinese literature in early Ming, mid-Quing; Chinese literature in Taiwan; Japanese linguistics; art of modern Japanese theatre; humor and laughter in Japanese literature; theme and style in modern Japanese fiction; Southeast Asian sociolinguistics; aspects of regional Indian literature, and the singular session on "Not such dutiful wives: women's manipulative strategies in North India".

Special was the blend of those who participated, scholars, journalists, politicians, scholars turned diplomats and vice versa, businessmen and various government officials. Accordingly, the theoretical consideration of problems was tempered by practical experience. Abstract thinking and sophisticated models as well as hypotheses thus quite often met the reality of down to earth questions.

After this panegyric I dare to add some minor reflections. Speakers quite often reference to their papers either that they would confine themselves to a few remarks because they had treated their subject exhaustively in their paper; or would say, "as I have pointed out in my paper", and leave it at that without any further explanation. Members of the same panel usually had read the papers - and occasionally referred to the papers of others. At some sessions there were handouts, and some of the papers were available at a nominal cost, but the vast majority of the participants had no chance to read these manuscripts before the sessions. Discussions therefore often consisted merely of question and answer. Given the dimensions involved it is extremely difficult to distribute papers in advance. This being the case, speakers should bear in mind that for their audience to follow them they should accompany their references with proper explanations.

There is something which exposes two faces of what foreigners are tempted to call a typical U. S. American academic approach. On the one hand, papers are presented in a very relaxed way; but on the other hand the treatment of an issue can be rather mechanistic. The United States is the home of game theory. To deal with relevant problems a substantial number of social scientists get together, start thinking, brainstorming and publishing. In the process the problem is first defined and then isolated, and finally, methods are worked out to manage it. This seems to be particularly true of foreign politics, where scholars deliver facts which they have found on missions and present them bundled as options to those whose job it is to make decisions. This method sometimes does not take into account all aspects of a problem nor the consequences that might arise precisely from such managing of the problem. Not all the talks were accurately phrased and to the point. A speaker might talk for a while, say that actually he does not have much to say, garnish this with funny aphorisms, then will "make a few points" and, after a humorous concluding remark, sit down because "I have already used too much of my time". "By and large", "in a certain way", "to a certain degree", "more or less", etc. may make the "few points" easy to listen to. But the eager listener expecting clear definitions, propositions and thought-provoking hypothesis is sometimes disappointed. Despite this congenial looseness, academic competition is as tough in the U. S. A. as in other places, if not more so - which may indeed account for the temporary relaxation. Of course, there were outstandingly presented sessions, for instance on literature and language. A theoretical framework was enriched with well chosen examples, and all this was rounded off with a concrete, rigorous analysis.

Perhaps one session was sometimes allotted too many papers. I went to one to listen to a legendary figure in the field of Chinese studies. He did not come nor did another member of the panel. I was disappointed. But it turned out to be one of the most inspiring sessions. The three remaining members used all the available time to present their papers in full, illustrated with handouts and slides. Here fewer papers meant more for the participants.

Some chairpersons did not attempt that much to structure presentation and guide discussion, confining their work to telling the speakers at intervals how many minutes they had left. I quite often felt, that agogic tempi would have been more suitable than the strict rule of the metronome.

It is obvious that meetings such as the Annual Meeting of the AAS unavoidably follow distinctive patterns. People go there to see, to listen and to be seen. Having had the privilege of attending two of these conferences I cannot but admire the AAS staff and all others involved in arranging and running such an event. It is a cornucopia which demonstrates the range, the potential and resources of Asian Studies in America.

Werner Pfennig