

News from Asia

Southeast Asian film archives in focus at the 7th Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference

Adam Knee

THE ASSOCIATION FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN CINEMAS (ASEAC) held its seventh international conference on 19-22 June 2012 at the National Museum of Singapore – in the city that also hosted the inaugural conference back in 2004. Focusing this year on the theme of 'The Politics, Practices, and Poetics of the Archive', the well-attended event was organized in cooperation with the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University, and included plenary talks, panels with scholars and archivists from around the world, archival film screenings, and visits to archives and galleries in Singapore.

An opening panel on practical issues that arise in film restoration – and in particular on the restoration of the historically significant Indonesian film *Lewat Djam Malam* (After the Curfew, 1953) – was followed by the screening of a newly struck 35mm print of this just-restored work. The first evening of the conference featured an opening address from film historian Thomas Doherty (Brandeis University), who spoke of the importance of archivists for facilitating historical research; Doherty noted how luck and happenstance inevitably bear upon such research, which in his experience has often come to fruition only owing to the alert eyes (and the strong memories) of seasoned archivists with full knowledge of their respective collections (before the days of the computer database).

The second day of the conference began with a special focus on Cambodian archives, with the first panel of the day addressing both the use of Cambodian archival materials in film and the present state of the Cambodian archives themselves. As part of the panel, a talk from Sopheap Chea, a representative of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre in Phnom Penh, introduced those present to an important regional resource for scholarship. The panel was followed by a rare screening of Rithy Panh's *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (1996), a film which makes use of archival materials to dramatize historical events of the Khmer Rouge years. The Cambodian focus was picked up again on the third day, with a special screening of the new documentary *Golden Slumbers* (2011) – a work which bemoans the absence of archival material from the golden age of Cambodian cinema before the rise of the Khmer Rouge. French-Cambodian filmmaker Davy Chou was also present to discuss his work with a very appreciative audience.

A mid-day break on the second day afforded conference participants the opportunity to join a guided tour of the National Museum of Singapore's newly-refurbished Film and Wayang Gallery. Other highlights of the day included a panel dealing with 'Film as Archives' – that is, with the archival functions films themselves can serve – and a plenary talk from Bliss Cua Lim (University of California at Irvine). Taking the situation of film heritage in the Philippines as its key example, Lim's talk considered practical conundrums and philosophical contradictions posed by the archive; that in preserving some works the archive may paradoxically need to make them less accessible to the public, and may also condemn (by omission) other works that may in some ways be equally significant.

The third day of the conference included panels on the struggles of the Sinematek Indonesia in Jakarta, and on audiovisual archival materials pertaining to Singapore. Such materials were also the subject of a talk from representatives of the Ivan Polunin archive, which included some screening of rare color footage of Singapore filmed in the 1950s by the archive's namesake. The afternoon was given to an event in memory of two important figures for the film archive community: Misbach Yusa Biran, the founder of the Sinematek Indonesia, and Alexis Tioseco, a young Filipino-Canadian critic and advocate of Southeast Asian independent cinema. Short films from Indonesia and the Philippines were screened, accompanied by brief introductions and reminiscences about the two men.

The fourth and final day of the conference featured panels on 'Religion and Film' and on 'Film and Cultural Memory' – both of which demonstrated in differing ways how, in preserving or capturing history, film itself may also be a site of ongoing cultural and religious negotiation and contestation. Also on the final day, some of the conference's fundamental concerns were highlighted at a plenary panel with film archivists from Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, which provided a unique opportunity to take a regional perspective on 'Contemporary Challenges for the Archive'. Panelists spoke of, among other things, potential preservation problems that arise with the

digitizing of audiovisual collections, difficulties in securing funding for the continuation of archives, and practical matters of maintaining enough space for growing collections and providing public access – in particular for audiences who may not have much experience in using archives.

Members of ASEAC were quite pleased with the success of this year's event, which attracted close to one hundred participants (speakers and attendees) and produced quite a few animated discussions between panelists and audience members. The organization intends to continue to build upon the evident interest in scholarship on Southeast Asian film, and is already making plans for its next conference in 2014 at another Southeast Asian city to be determined.

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The articles on these "News from Asia" pages were compiled by our regional editor Caixia Lu at The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore; they cover local stories relevant to Asian studies in general.

If you would like to contribute to this section in a future issue, please contact our new editor at ISEAS, Dr. Lee Hock Guan iias_iseas@iseas.edu.sg



A reappraisal of sources for Asian studies

Rila Mukherjee

THE MEETING 'A REAPPRAISAL OF SOURCES FOR ASIAN STUDIES' was held in Kolkata and Chandernagore (West Bengal, Hooghly) from 5-9 March 2012, with participants from four countries: India, France, the United States and China. The aim of the meeting was to showcase new findings that challenge older scholarship on Asia.

The first day, held in collaboration with the Department of South and South East Asian Studies, Calcutta University (joint coordinator Lipi Ghosh, the Departmental Chair), saw Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (former Vice Chancellor of Viswa Bharati University, Santiniketan and former Chairman, Indian Council for Historical Research) delivering the first keynote address on connections versus connectivities. Barun De (former Chairman, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute for Asian Studies, and currently Tagore Fellow, Victoria Memorial) delivered the opening remarks on Asian connections.

Kenneth R. Hall (Ball State University), Jean Francois Salles (formerly of the National Center for Scientific Research, CNRS), Marie Françoise Bouscass (University of Lyon and CNRS), and H.S. Vasudevan (former Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute for Asian Studies and Professor of the Department of History, Calcutta University) spoke or presented papers on new sources from the archaeological perspective and Greek and Russian material on South Asia. Panels were organized in such a way as to offer plenty of time for discussion.

On the second day, the meeting moved on to Chandernagore, a former French enclave 55 kilometres from Kolkata, where the Institut de Chandernagore, with support from the Hooghly district administration, hosted the deliberations over the next two days. At the second inaugural, at the Institut de Chandernagore, major events included the showing of a short film 'Europe on the Ganges' (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage INTACH), a brief talk by G.M. Kapur (Convenor, West Bengal chapter of INTACH) on the Hooghly heritage zone, and the book releases of S.C. Sen's Chandernagore: From Bondage to Freedom and Radhika Seshan's Trade and Politics on the Coromandel Coast: Seventeenth and early Eighteenth Centuries. Om Prakash

(Emeritus, Delhi School of Economics) delivered the second keynote address on Dutch sources on Asia. This was chaired by B.D. Chattopadhyaya (formerly of Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University) and was followed by an excursion to the Hooghly heritage area of former European colonies of Chandernagore, Chinsurah (Dutch) and Bandel (Portuguese), as well as to the Armenian Church at Chinsurah.

The third day was devoted to a thorough appraisal of sixteenth to eighteenth century sources for Asian studies; here the viability of European factory records for South Asia was discussed by Ruby Maloni (Mumbai), Rila Mukherjee (Director, Institut de Chandernagore and formerly of the University of Hyderabad) and Radhika Seshan (the University of Hyderabad). Ilicia Sprey (United States) and Biao Yang (Shanghai, China) spoke on European literary perspectives on Vietnam and China's changing attitudes to the maritime Silk Route.

The meeting was funded by the West Bengal Higher Education Department, which funds the Institut de Chandernagore. The chief sponsors of the meeting were the Asia Centre, Kolkata (K.P.V. Nair) and the Hooghly District Administration at Chinsurah. Participants then departed for a Sundarbans cruise, sponsored by the Hooghly District Administration, and an informal valedictory on the meeting was held on the country steamer on which the participants stayed for the next two days.

Several useful outcomes emerged from this meeting. It enabled participants to learn about recent archaeological discoveries that challenge many assumptions on the history of South, South East and West Asia and underscored the need to incorporate this new material into recent scholarship. It also offered a new look at China's changing perceptions on its overseas connections, a reappraisal of European literature on East Asia, and above all, the enduring utility of European factory records on South Asia. Resulting publications will emphasize the new paths that the meeting opened up.

History was the dominant discipline at this meeting, but as it was the first in the Asian Connections series launched by the Institut de Chandernagore in 2011, we hope to encourage practitioners from other disciplines to reappraise their source material, archive, or terrain in subsequent meetings.

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