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Association for Asian Studies Conference

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Conference Reports

The Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS)

Chicago, IL

26-29 March 2015

The 2015 Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) was held March 26-29 at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers. The premier gathering of scholars from all corners and disciplines of Asia, the conference featured a vast array of panels, workshops, films, lectures, plenaries, and receptions of interest to members of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies. While the conference and AAS more broadly are framed according to sub-regional categories of Asian Studies – i.e., South Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea, China, and Inner Asia – this year’s conference also followed a theme particularly relevant to scholars of Nepal and the wider Himalaya: Border Crossing/Inter Asia.

The 2015 AAS conference featured a number of panels specific to the Himalaya region and Tibetan Plateau. These include: “Sacred Landscapes in the Himalayas”; “Agents of Change: Authority, Social Coherence, and Assimilation in Tibet and the Diaspora”; “Constructing Collectivization and the Cultural Revolution in Tibet and Xinjiang: Ethnic Identity and the Contestation of Historical Memory”; “Urbanization and Resettlement on the Tibetan Plateau: Adapting to New Space”; and, “Making the Minority

Major: The Intersection of Cultural Identity and Infrastructure Development in Western China.”

In addition to empirical and regional specificity, numerous panels at the 2015 AAS conference also discussed critical themes and conceptual frameworks of interest for scholars of Nepal and the Himalaya. Broadly construed as Inter-Asian Connections, these included but were not limited to Comparative Politics, Travel Histories, and the importance of Place and Space between South, East, and Central Asia. A sample of these sessions include: “Dispossession by ‘Development’: Adverse Impacts of State-Sponsored Development Schemes on Land Security of Rural Communities”; and, “Does Election Matter? Election and Democratization in South Asia”; “Engaging with the Concept of Indigeneity in Southeast Asia”; “Collecting Kashmir: The Arts of Kashmir and Their Legacy in the Western Himalayas”; “Peripheral Accounts: South Asian Travel Writing from Burma to Bukhara”; “Bounding Space: Natural Resources, Borders, and State Formation in Asia”; “Place, Space, and Travel.” Key conversations were also generated at the Coomaraswamy Prize Panel, “Responses to Akhil Gupta’s Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India,” that contribute towards a better understanding of the current political moment in Nepal and contestations over ethnic identity, rights, and representation under new federal structures.

Speaking both to and beyond Nepal and the Himalaya, keynotes, plenary sessions, and roundtables at the 2015 AAS conference also presented fresh insights and new approaches to the study of Asia. Ma Thida’s keynote address, “Myanmar, Still at the Fork in the Road,” provided rich food for thought and complicated conventional area studies frameworks (and advanced the question of Myanmar’s place in the ANHS community). Mrinalini Sinha’s presidential address, “Premonitions of the Past,” revisited the present import of colonial history and complexity of post-colonial identity in South Asia. Two plenary panels on “Asia Beyond the Headlines” were also of particular relevance to the current political moment in Nepal: “Protest and Dissent in Asia” and “The New Asian Strongmen: Abe, Modi, Xi, and Others.” Finally, the mid-conference roundtable “Thinking Across Regions and Disciplines: A Conversation on Inter-Asia Research” advanced conversations central to the ANHS community on the regional and disciplinary location of Nepal and the Himalaya in the context of wider Asian and area studies frameworks.

Members of the ANHS community also received awards and participated in research workshops at the AAS Chicago conference. For “outstanding and innovative scholarship across the discipline and country of specialization for a book on Inner Asia,” the Gene E. Smith Book Award was awarded to Emily T. Yeh of the University of Colorado Boulder for

her 2014 monograph *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. Yeh is on the editorial board of HIMALAYA. AAS conferences are also an excellent opportunity for graduate student research and dissertation development. With support from the Henry Luce Foundation and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Dannah Dennis of the University of Virginia participated in the AAS-SSRC Dissertation Workshop Series under the 2015 theme: Religion and the State in Asia.

The annual AAS conference is a rich and rewarding event for both established and emerging scholars and remains a professional gathering of intellectual rigor and social engagement. Numerous meetings of professional associations and academic initiatives were held in Chicago. These meetings and receptions included but were not limited to: the AAS South Asia Council and AAS China and Inner Asia Council; the American Institute of Indian Studies; the American Center for Mongolian Studies; the Burma Studies Group/Burma Studies Foundation as well as the Committee on Teaching about Asia and the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy. Many universities with unique histories in Asian Studies also held receptions and networking events, including: University of Chicago Affiliates Reception; University of Washington Reception; Yale Asian Studies Councils' Joint Reception; Stanford University Reception; UC Berkeley Reception; and University of Michigan Reception. Meetings and planning sessions in Chicago for other organizations committed to the growth of Asian Studies across the academy include: the AAS Editorial Board Meeting; the Asian Librarians Liaison Committee meeting; the Midwest Conference on Asian Studies (MCAA); the National Endowment for the Humanities meeting; and the

South Asia Across the Disciplines Series Board Meeting. In addition to the above-mentioned panels, lectures, and themed events, the conference also featured an impressive array of film screenings and a large book fair.

Finally, while there was strong representation from scholars on Nepal and the Himalaya across panels and presentations at AAS 2015, this author hopes for even greater ANHS engagement at AAS conferences in the years ahead. Situated at the crossroads of South, East, and Central Asia, ANHS has much to offer AAS. This is particularly true with respect to expanding conversations across Asian landscapes and further disrupting traditional area studies frameworks in the academy and policy realms. Towards a greater production of critical knowledge and cross-disciplinary dialogue, these kinds of interventions are among the most important contributions to be made by scholars of Nepal and the Himalaya.

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Articulating Ethnicity: Language and the Boundaries of the Himalayas

University at Buffalo

18 April 2015

Situated at the peripheries of the world's two most populous nation-states—India and China—the Himalayan region represents an exceptional site for the study of the intersection of language and ethnic and national politics. As the Himalayas are home to both contested ethno-nationalisms and disputed and shifting borders, language often finds

itself not only at the forefront of the region's cultural politics, but also its geopolitics. Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* signified a major shift in the approach to the study of ethnic groups (Fredrick Barth. [1969] 1998. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press). Barth argued that if we focus on boundaries, we can see that the forms ethnicity takes are relational—it is the boundary, in fact, which makes salient the cultural content of ethnic groups. This conference engaged with and utilized Barth's early insights to investigate the role of language in boundary maintenance among Himalayan peoples.

Articulating Ethnicity: Language and the Boundaries of the Himalayas, organized by Walter Hakala (University at Buffalo) and Joseph Stadler (Gannon University), was a workshop-style conference hosted at the University at Buffalo in April 2015 that brought together a remarkable group of researchers for a thought-provoking discussion. The workshop was divided into three panels that focused on (1) language, (2) Himalayan populations living abroad, and (3) land and territory. These three panels, which were chaired by Elizabeth Mazzolini (University at Buffalo), Elen Turner (*Himal Southasia* magazine) and Vasiliki Neofotistos (University at Buffalo), respectively, structured the conference's conversations.

To begin the workshop, Mark Turin (University of British Columbia) succinctly arranged and discussed a number of issues related to language and ethnicity throughout the Himalayan region. Addressing the politics of language and the language of politics as both expressions of political identity and public displays of cultural belonging, he argued that the rapid