



Asian Australian Studies Research Network

AASRN CLUSTER REPORTS

from the AAI 2 CONFERENCE (28-30 June 2007)

1. VISUAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA
Cluster Convenor: Dean Chan

2. LITERATURE, THEATRE, PERFORMANCE AND FILM
Cluster Convenor: Olivia Khoo

3. CULTURAL HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY
Cluster Convenor: Tseen Khoo

► VISUAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA – Cluster Convenor: Dean Chan

AAI2 provided a snapshot of the current depth in research and creative practice in the field. Plenary panelists Greg Leong, Savanhdy Vongpoothorn and Owen Leong spoke about the intricately entangled productivities and problematics involved in the public exhibition of their artworks. These practicing artists acknowledged the market, art institutional and academic pressures on them to “perform” their ethnicity or diasporic Asian identities. While they seem to agree on the necessity of maintaining the integrity of their art practice as a potential counterpoint to these external pressures, it is equally important to highlight that these are not simplistic proposals for artistic insularity. The dialectic between private and public, between self-positioning and being positioned, is emphasised in their presentations as a reflexive and on-going process. “Exhibiting Asian Australianness” is therefore equally subject to, and contingent on, situated material, spatiotemporal and psychical contexts.

Many other AAI2 presentations echoed this reflexive orientation towards situated analyses of Asian Australian cultural production. Early career researchers such as Som Sengmany, Michelle Antoinette and Francis Maravillas are engaged in developing fresh paradigms for critical enquiry and analysing emergent case studies in Asian Australian visual culture. Sengmany’s incisive paper on Ah Xian’s art as a context for examining processes of inscribing ‘Chineseness’ on the diasporic body, and Antoinette’s engaging analysis of the politics of curatorship and exhibition programming at Gallery 4a, richly complement Maravillas’s innovative proposal for a reorientation towards a ‘Southern’ hermeneutical constellation of the contemporary. At the same time, groundbreaking work by Craig Norris and others on examining connections among popular culture, fandom and transnational networks signal important new areas for scholarship in this research cluster.

Several cluster projects have been initiated in the past year. The inaugural project is *Tracking Echoes*, the online research resource for *Echoes of Home: Memory and Mobility in Recent Austral-Asian Art*. This exhibition was an initiative of the Museum of Brisbane and curated by Christine Clark. *Tracking Echoes* accompanies the exhibition’s national tour in 2007-8. Launched in March 2007, the project website provides a free access archive for this exhibition by collating curatorial essays, artist pages, and invited responses to the exhibition. These responses, which include contributions by AASRN members, provide a valuable record of the exhibition’s diverse reception at the different touring venues. This pilot project thereby offers a working model for developing and archiving an exhibition website, as well as mobilising the website as an innovative aspect of an exhibition’s public programme. Special thanks to Som Sengmany who provided exemplary assistance with the design, creation, and maintenance (between March and June 2007) of the *Tracking Echoes* website.

Current preliminary project plans include two new exhibition projects with significant website and publication components, as well as the commencement of discussions on one collaborative grant application. Other ideas for one-day themed symposia and special focus workshops were mentioned to me in casual conversation at AAI2, but I am aware that many members were unable to attend the recent conference. So I would like to take this opportunity to warmly invite all visual arts and new media cluster members and associates alike to keep sending me your suggestions and proposals for future activities.

► **LITERATURE, THEATRE, PERFORMANCE AND FILM – Cluster Convenor:
Olivia Khoo**

The fields of Asian-Australian Literature, Film and Performance were well represented at the recent *AAI2* conference.

After an inspiring keynote paper by Suvendrini Perera on the first day of the conference, Bree Hadley, Peta Stephenson and Alan Han began one of the first sessions of the day with an eclectic series of papers exploring the notion of 'performance' across a range of different sites: from butoh, to television comedy, to the cultural practices of Indigenous-Asian Australians. In a separate panel on cosmopolitics, Audrey Yue introduced us to a new way of thinking about Asian Australian cinema through an 'ethics of identity' in relation to Heng Teng's short film *The Last Chip*.

The first night of the conference was capped off with a brilliant evening of Asian Australian cabaret. The MCs for the night and stars of the show were the talented drag kings 'Mr Hung Lo' (aka Raquel Gabutero Bacatan) and 'Cana Fukuoke' (aka Lenna Kawazu). We were also treated to readings by Merlinda Bobis, Tom Cho, and Shalini Akhil. Greg Leong appeared as Princess Feng Yee, the 'Dame Edna of Chinese-Australia', and performed Cantonese and Mandarin translations of traditional Australian folk songs such as *Waltzing Matilda* and *The Road to Gundagai*. The audience sang along laughing, somewhat uneasily, as Greg no doubt would have wanted it.

The plenary literature panel on "Marketing Asian Australianness" was held on the second day of the conference. Questions addressed by the panellists, Michelle Bakar, Simone Lazaroo, Merlinda Bobis and Tom Cho, included: How can we define the category of Asian Australian literature? Should Asian Australian authors feel compelled to write about their own 'identity'? The more established writers on the panel, Bobis and Lazaroo, very generously described their own experiences with the marketing of their books, and their sometimes ambivalent relationship to the choices they have had to make, or those that have been made for them. Emerging (yet already well-respected) writers Cho and Bakar gave thoughtful, honest, and equally impassioned views on the topic. The theme of "Marketing Asian Australianness" proved timely as it was further discussed, invoked and debated throughout the rest of the conference, demonstrating a relevance not just for the field of literature but for any cultural practitioner confronted by questions of value, artistic freedom, and the commodification of their ethnicity and identity.

Two other panels on Asian Australian literature were held on the same day: one featuring Anita Mannur, Robyn Morris, Adam Aitken and Ang Chin Geok, providing new approaches to the role of food, the figure of the mother (and madness), and the 'new woman' of AA fiction. The other, with Clare Bradford, Deb Dudek and Wenche Ommundsen on Asian Australian Children's Literature, was based on a collaborative ARC funded project on multiculturalism and children's literature.

An astute comment raised in the first panel by Jacqueline Lo, and echoed by Merlinda Bobis, was that in our emphasis on considering what *white Australian* audiences think about Asian Australian literature, we have erased the Asian Australian reader entirely. What might have seemed implicit to the question of audiences at the conference was exposed as a (sadly) neglected issue. Although the difficulties of this revelation could not be adequately addressed in the time we had, it certainly gave us pause for thought.

On the final day of the conference, William Yang and Tony Ayres both very generously gave their time to show us their work: William Yang with a slide show

called *Identity and Place*, and Tony Ayres with a preview of his new film *The Home Song Stories*.

The growth in and strength of work produced by, or about, Asian Australians was further highlighted by the launch of three publications during the conference:

- *Peril #3* – the latest edition of online Asian Australian zine, *Peril*, edited by Hoa Pham. Issue #3 is themed “Rebel” and features a series of engaging articles, poems and reviews available at: <http://www.asianaustralian.org/>
- Peta Stephenson’s *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia’s Indigenous-Asian Story*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007.
- Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert’s *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia*, London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007.

At the AASRN meeting, several projects were raised for potential development within the film, performance and literature cluster. Most members present agreed that we should try to develop greater interdisciplinary connections between and across the various fields. One way to do this might be to hold a scriptwriting workshop, or a masterclass with an established Asian Australian film director and/or (screen)writer. Several budding filmmakers have already expressed interest in participating in such a workshop. I am also looking into the possibility of holding writers’ workshops in collaboration with bodies such as the Victorian Writers’ Centre and the NSW Writers’ Centre. In the meantime, there are fabulous ancillary events such as the recent Asian Australian short film festival, *An Asian Australian Occasion*, organized by Indigo Willing, which we hope to see return even bigger and better next year. And for aspiring or established writers out there, don’t forget the call for submissions for Alice Pung’s anthology, *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, due in December. Adam Aitken and Hoa Pham are very industriously working on obtaining Australia Council funding for *Peril*; other opportunities for collaborating on grant applications were also floated.

If you would like to discuss any of these, or any other, projects, please feel free to contact me at: o.khoo@unsw.edu.au. I am happy to help facilitate projects or to hook you up with like-minded individuals.

► **CULTURAL HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY – Cluster Convenor: Tseen Khoo**

The broad range of disciplines that are included in this cluster were represented at the conference through a range of events. Most specifically, these included Senator Penny Wong's keynote presentation on the second morning, the panels on "Communal Identities," "Chinese Australian Identities" and "Asian Australian Diasporic Formations," and the focused CAFHOV (Chinese Australian Family Historians of Victoria) session.

Jen Kwok, who is a member of AASRN and completing a doctorate on Asian Australian political communities, will be providing a report about Penny Wong's talk so I won't repeat too much in that regard. It was very worthwhile having her presentation to balance the conference program and provide a much-needed perspective on where she saw herself in our nation's political context. While Wong is a consummate politician, we were still privy to some insights about her positioning and personal history. Chaired by Don Nakanishi (Director, UCLA Asian American Studies Center), the session was a timely contribution to discussions about Australian political priorities and a window into the competing demands for racialised politicians. Kwok's own insightful presentation at the conference emphasised how little research there is in this field and, as Nakanishi commented informally, this was an interesting contrast to how Asian American Studies had developed (where early emphasis in research was often focused on community politics and political representation).

Areas of research presented at AAI 2 that are of particular interest to this cluster include:

- Asian Australian Muslim communities (Regina Ganter and Emad Soliman, Nahid Kabir)
- Chinese Australian histories and heritage (CAFHOV panel [Kevin Wong Hoy, Kevin Rains, Barbara Nichol and Rosemary Farrell], Carole Tan) and
- Alternative Asian Australian community formations (Takeshi Hamano, Ashley Carruthers, Devleena Ghosh, Lars Jensen, Sunil Govinnage).

These are only quickly sketched, contingent categories, of course, and the cluster itself welcomes other areas and emphases. The need for more nuanced and interdisciplinary work about Asian Australian communities is clear, and there's a lot of scope for these studies to be engaged with local as well as international contexts.

During AAI 2, I also had a preliminary chat with RoseAnne Misajon and Al Noveloso, who created and run Pinoy TV (currently screening on Channel 31). They expressed great interest in broadening their community TV programs to encompass 'Asian Australian' material more generally. I'll be following up on this soon, and suggesting people they might interview/profile for the show.

I've listed a few initial thoughts below about other activities this cluster could develop (all of which are directly pertinent to Asian Australian Studies but can also be broader in intellectual/networking appeal):

1. Workshop/seminars about the politics and processes of oral histories
2. Workshop about grant applications, particularly Linkage grants with community or government organisations
3. Symposium focused on ethnic community politics
4. Symposium or series of seminars/events focused on community arts and artists

Many members of the AASRN were not able to attend AAI 2 and, as cluster convenor, I look forward to hearing from these researchers about what they see as potential projects, collaborations and other activities we could undertake.