



# Asian Currents

The Asian Studies Association of Australia  
*Maximising Australia's Asian knowledge*

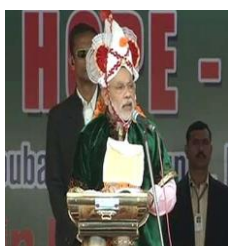
February 2014

ISSN 1449-4418



## No easy way out of Thailand's quandary

To some, the current conflict in Thailand is simple. On one side are the rural poor, the red shirts, seen to be pro-democracy; on the other are the royalist elites associated with the yellow shirts who morphed into the red-white-and-blue shirts and who are dismissed for their apparently anti-democratic behaviour. But the devil is in the detail. [Read more](#)



## Too early for bets as India lumbers to a national election

India will go to the polls again in coming months. If recent public opinion polls can be relied upon for guidance, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jan Sangh will pick up about 100 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament, putting it within striking distance of forming a coalition government. [Read more](#)



## The illogical politics of Japanese security policy

When Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December last year, it predictably caused outrage across the region. Many commentators described the visit as an act of provocation on the part of a diehard nationalist. [Read more](#)



## Searching for meaning in Jang Song-taek's death

Despite the plausibility of the many explanations that have appeared in media and academic forums about the purge of Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song-taek, we cannot be certain what happened to him, or why. [Read more](#)

## Long live the five-year plan!

The Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee has foreshadowed radical changes to China's domestic and international markets. [Read more](#)

## Chinese without tears

E-learning tools are promising a revolution in the way Chinese is taught. [Read more](#)

## Celebrating Kartini

Come 21, April Indonesians and Indonesianists around the world will recall their first female national hero. [Read more](#)

## Sydney's booming Chinatown



Chinatowns around the world are in decline—but Sydney's is defying the trend. [Read more](#)

## Also in this issue

[Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia celebrates first year](#)

[China's return to nature](#)

[Key speakers for ASAA 14](#)

[In search of authenticity in South-east Asia](#)

[Bulletin board](#)

[New books on Asia](#)

[Coming events](#)

[ASAA news](#)

# No easy way out of Thailand's quandary

The crisis in Thailand is much more than a conflict between two sides.

By John Blaxland

To some, the current conflict in Thailand is simple. On one side are the rural poor, the red shirts, seen to be pro-democracy; on the other are the royalist elites associated with the yellow shirts, who have morphed into the red-white-and-blue shirts and who are dismissed for their apparently anti-democratic behaviour. But the devil is in the detail.

According to the narrative of the red shirts, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–06) is the champion of the poor. Elected in 2001, Thaksin was very popular with the northern and north-eastern electorates for having introduced populist policies on public health, access to cheap loans, and government amenities.

Few genuinely dispute that Thaksin did a remarkable job in bettering the lives of the rural communities of the north and north-east. But he raised concerns by encroaching on the kudos associated with royally endorsed rural development programs.

In Thaksin's effort to root out the drug trade, the police engaged in extrajudicial violence that left some applauding his firmness and others horrified at the brutality and subversion of the justice system, such as it was.

In Thailand's deep south, Thaksin's high-handed policies helped fan the flames of a violent separatist insurgency that re-emerged in 2004 and endures a decade later.

Thaksin's sins were not just to be greedy, but exceedingly greedy—and vindictive. His greed came back to haunt him as people resented his exploitation of government contracts

for billions of dollars to personal and family gain.

Previous Thai prime ministers have left office considerably wealthier than beforehand. But Thaksin is different. He lacks subtlety, modesty, discretion, or much compassion—and he keeps wanting to come back!



Thaksin Shinawatra: keeps wanting to come back.

After Thaksin was ousted in a bloodless military coup in September 2006, the interim government, established with backing from members of the opposition Democrat Party, set about writing

a fresh constitution aimed, in part, at disenfranchising Thaksin's MPs for corruption and at including enough checks and balances to prevent Thaksin's re-emergence.

---

*Thaksin's sins were not just to be greedy, but exceedingly greedy—and vindictive.*

---

But even with a rejigged constitution, Thaksin's proxy party still won the December 2007 elections. His protégés, and now his sister Yingluck, have carried on his mandate through proxy parties, renamed each time a constitutional injunction threatened to delegitimise them. The disdain of opposing groups for Thaksin is accentuated by his apparent disregard for the monarchy, and by reported attempts to unduly influence key members of the royal family. As the end of the king's long reign approaches, fears of how Thaksin might seek to manipulate the highest office are generating alarmed responses.

Opposition is seen to revolve around what were once called the 'yellow shirts', who closed down Bangkok's main international airport in 2009, before enlisting the support of a breakaway coalition party from Thaksin's camp to cross over and join the Democrat Party. The defection sufficiently altered the balance of power in parliament to bring about a change of government, without having to call an election.



Abhisit Vejjajiva failed to gain traction in the rural north and north-east.

The so-called Democrat Party government that followed, led by Abhisit Vejjajiva (2009–11), failed to gain political traction in the rural north and north-east regions. And in May 2010, Abhisit and his deputy, Suthep Thaugsuben, ordered

the controversial military crackdown on the 'red shirts', who had occupied the downtown Bangkok shopping district of Ratchaprasong.



Yingluck Shinawatra is carrying on her brother's mandate.

Abhisit lost the 2011 elections convincingly to Yingluck Shinawatra and her Phue Thai Party, having invested little effort to woo the electorate in the north and north-east away from Thaksin's populism.

More recently, one of Thaksin's most popular deals, the rice pledge scheme, administered through Yingluck, has started unravelling badly. Thaksin's promise to maintain a fixed price for rice crops has generated unsustainable rice holdings as prices have plummeted, leaving the nation with billions of dollars in debt and a looming global rice market crisis, if or when the nation's internal rice prices are allowed to fall back to earth. Poor rice farmers affected by the near

---

*The yellow shirts were essentially untouchable by the police and carried considerable sympathy within higher echelons of the establishment, including the military.*

---

collapse of the rice buy-back scheme are wavering, with some already speaking out against Thaksin's proxy government.

Yingluck Shinawatra managed to establish good rapport with the military chiefs following the 2012 floods of Bangkok and the central plain. But the reports of Thaksin's direct and overt manipulation of Thai politics—even directly appointing senior police and other senior government officials without consulting Yingluck—led to rising levels of contempt and a greater willingness to stand up against the Shinawatra system, and for more people than ever to operate outside the parliamentary system, which is seen as co-opted by Thaksin.

The catalyst for dramatic action was the attempt to pass an Amnesty Act that would have absolved not only Abhisit and Suthep for the May 2010 crackdown on the red shirts, but also would have allowed Thaksin to return to Thailand without having to face a two-year jail sentence for corruption.

Many claim they have now joined the protest movement to stop the Shinawatras and to restore a semblance of order that the predominantly Bangkok-based protesters are more comfortable with.

But why are the protesters taking their campaign to the streets and out of the parliament, and why boycott an election rather than campaign to win it?

The Bangkok-based yellow shirts have morphed into the red-white-and-blue shirts—staunch monarchists led, in effect, for the last couple of

months by the firebrand former Democrat deputy PM, Suthep Thaugsuban. The so-called *ammats*, or the Bangkok royalist elites, are seen to be closely associated with this group.

The red shirts' rhetoric about the *ammats* carried some resonance when the yellow-shirt crowds protested in 2009 against Thaksin's proxies in office. At the time, protesters numbered only in the several thousands, but they carried disproportionate weight in domestic political affairs. The yellow shirts were essentially untouchable by the police and had considerable sympathy from within higher echelons of the establishment, including the military—much to the chagrin of Thaksin and his red-shirt supporters.

This time around the anti-Thaksin protests have much broader appeal. Though still predominantly Bangkok-based, the protests now extend further into the middle class and into southern Thailand—and, reportedly, into pockets of the north-east.

Notwithstanding this broader appeal evident in Bangkok, the Democrats boycotted the recent elections—much as they did early in 2006, helping to precipitate the September 2006 coup—knowing they had little prospect of winning an outright parliamentary majority or mustering a governing coalition.



Yellow shirt demonstration in Bangkok.

portrayed by its critics as stacked by pro-Democrat supporters. Such support is also found in the National Anti-Corruption Commission, which is threatening to oust Yingluck and her MPs on charges of corruption, also

Their actions outside the processes mandated by the constitution have considerable tacit support from the Electoral Commission,

suggesting a stretching of the commission's mandate for party political purposes in support of the Democrats. The potential actions of the Electoral Commission and the National Anti-Corruption Commission adds to the suspense to an already complicated scene.

As a former police officer, Thaksin has many supporters and sympathisers within the police force, which is seen as sympathetic to him and the red shirts, while the military has been seen by critics as being staunchly in defence of the institutions of the elite and associated with the Democrat Party—an inherently unhelpful perception for the health of civil society in any country. Thailand's police and military chiefs recognise these dangers and seek to downplay the differences, but they remain, and are palpable.

The military chiefs understand the electoral muscle of the Shinawatra clan and know from their experience in 2006 that staging a coup is unlikely to resolve the problem, as Thailand is now too politically polarised for military intervention. There are also concerns about so-called 'watermelon' soldiers—green on the outside but red-sympathisers on the inside. These fears are particularly noticeable in the north and north-east, from where many of the soldiers are recruited and based.

---

*Thaksin's populism and the rising living standards in the north and north-east have upset this apparent karmic order.*

---

Some observers point to an inherent incompatibility of the western concept of democracy in a predominantly Buddhist-syncretist state, where Hindu concepts and practices sit comfortably as part of the Thai Buddhist narrative. Many perceive an element of karmic order



at play. Broadly, believers in reincarnation also come to believe that where one is born in the pecking order is where one belongs. While the poorer, darker-skinned people of the north and north-east—the *chao-naa* or rice farmers—were welcome to participate in the electoral process, they were to do so on the implicit understanding that they did not get to call the shots in forming a government.

For generations, successive governments formed from various factions of the Bangkok elite have ruled the country. Thaksin's populism and the rising living standards in the north and north-east have upset this apparent karmic order—much to the consternation of those in Bangkok who see themselves at the top of the karmic totem pole.

---

*Many pine for the days when the reigning monarch stepped in to resolve the political impasse of the time.*

---

Others, less steeped in Buddhist practices or world view (along with many postmodern-thinking westerner observers), dismiss this perception as superficial and irrelevant. No doubt the economic dimension to the political equation is resoundingly significant, but observers should be wary about imposing their own cultural value system when seeking to understand and interpret the myriad of factors at work in the Thai body politic. In Thailand, karma still matters.

Some wonder if the political impasse would be resolved if Thaksin and his clan simply disappeared from the scene. Others see this as fanciful, simplistic and naïve. To them, the divide in Thai society is far deeper and palpable, and likely to be enduring. That divide sees the predominantly rural north and north-east pitted against the urbanised

people in and around Bangkok, supported by the Democrat's base in southern Thailand.

Yet others see this as an oversimplification of a more nuanced picture, where Democrats carried significant minorities of the popular vote in northern or north-eastern electorates, and a sufficient proportion of the vote to negate this perception as unduly simplistic.

Many pine for the days, as in 1992, when the reigning monarch stepped in to resolve the political impasse of the time. Today, the much-loved king is ageing and unwell. As much as the people wish him long life, he appears unable to make a decisive contribution.

Many find it hard to conceive of any successor being able to fill the king's shoes. Such concerns appear to be making the political jockeying all the more desperate.

*Dr John Blaxland is a Senior Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, at the Australian National University.*

---

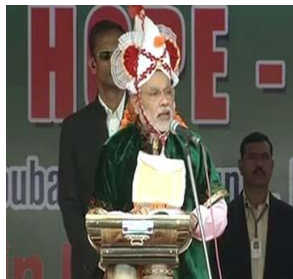
[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

# Too early for bets as India lumbers to a national election

With India due to go to the polls in coming months, the outcome is still anyone's guess.

By Peter Mayer

The cliché 'India is the world's largest democracy' trips off the tongue readily enough. But the logistical realities of a national election in India—in the general elections of 2009 there were over 700 million registered voters who used 1.4 million voting machines in nearly 700 000 polling places, casting their votes in five phases for candidates contesting on behalf of about 1300 parties—are staggering.



Modi in tribal headgear on the platform in the north-eastern state of Manipur. Image: [NDTV](#).

India will go to the polls again in coming months. If recent public opinion polls can be relied upon for guidance, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP) will pick up about 100 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament, putting it within striking distance of forming a coalition government. If the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) does reach the magic total of 272 seats, the new prime minister will be Narendra Modi, currently in his third term as chief minister in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

Modi has established a sound record as an effective administrator whose business-friendly government is seen as relatively free from corruption. On the campaign trail, Modi boasts, justifiably, to large and apparently enthusiastic crowds in other states who suffer daily power cuts, that in

his state, the electricity is available 24/7.

Modi excels at delivering punchy sound bites like this which have almost no discernible policy content. The essential message seems to be 'trust me'. That message appears to be getting through: national polling in India's major cities indicates that Modi is the preferred candidate for prime minister by about half those surveyed.

But Narendra Modi also carries some baggage which may ultimately hurt his chances of becoming India's next prime minister. In 2002, in his first term as chief minister, a major communal riot occurred in Gujarat in which 800–2000 Muslims and around 250 Hindus were killed. Many times those numbers were injured and there was extensive destruction of property.

---

*Internationally, Modi remains an unwelcome visitor; he is, for example, currently barred from visiting the United States.*

---

In 2012 an Indian court convicted 32 people, including a former Gujarat state minister as well a Hindu leader, of direct involvement in the attacks on Gujarat's Muslims. Modi himself was cleared by an official investigation in 2012 of direct responsibility for the deaths and destruction. But it also seems clear that he did not take decisive actions to bring the three-day riot under control. Although Modi has in recent weeks tried to make long-overdue overtures to India's Muslims, their strategically critical votes—Muslims make up 13.5 per cent of the population—are almost certain to go to opponents of the BJP.

Internationally, Modi remains an unwelcome visitor; he is, for example, currently barred from visiting the United States. Modi also appears to have less than full-hearted support of his own party, which views him as too self-willed and independent. His nomination as the party's candidate for prime minister was opposed by many significant leaders in the party. The very qualities of decisive leadership which undergirded his successes in Gujarat are potential weaknesses at the national level. As the *Economist* observed in its 14 December, 2013 edition:

[Modi] is an autocratic loner who is a poor delegator. That may work at state level, but not at national level—particularly when the BJP is likely to come to power only as part of a coalition.

The main opponent of the BJP is the Congress Party which heads up a rival coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which has been in office since 2004. There is a general consensus that the government, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, has run out of ideas and energy in its second term. The high rates of



Minister Manmohan Singh: government, has run out of ideas and energy in its second term.

economic growth which characterised the UPA's first term in office have evaporated. Persistent inflation, especially in the prices of basic foods like onions, growing anger with perceptions of high levels of corruption and dissatisfaction with slow growth in

employment have fuelled strong anti-incumbency sentiments.

Perhaps in recognition of the widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of his government, the 81-year-old Singh announced in January that he was retiring from politics. That announcement immediately led to speculation that Rahul Gandhi—son of Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (and

---

*Despite the unmistakeable evidence in the public opinion polls of a 'BJP wave', there are ample grounds for a more cautious outlook at this early stage of the campaign.*

---

assassinated former PM Rajiv Gandhi), grandson of assassinated former PM Indira Gandhi and great-grandson of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru—would be the new standard-bearer of the Congress for prime minister. Those speculations were promptly hosed down, reinforcing the perception that Rahul Gandhi is a very reluctant politician who is more interested in effecting internal reforms in the Congress Party than taking the fight up to Modi.



Rahul Gandhi: reluctant politician?

Despite the unmistakeable evidence, in the public opinion polls, of a 'BJP wave', there are ample grounds for a more cautious outlook

at this early stage of the campaign. The first caveat is that opinion polls have not accurately predicted outcomes in recent elections. In 2004, for example, the polls indicated that the BJP's 'India Shining' campaign would return it to power. In the event, the Congress-led UPA won the election.

The second thing to consider is that an alphabet soup of regional parties, whose leaders have a strong following, are yet to announce which, if any, of the major party alliances they will join. Since between them these regional parties usually secure around 40 per cent of lower house seats, their support is essential in forming a government. If, as seems possible at this early stage, they decide to band together to form a third force it might create a situation

like that which occurred in 1996, when a similar alliance, supported from outside by the Congress formed government, shutting out the BJP.



Political neophyte Arvind Kejriwal could have an unpredictable impact.

Finally, there is the unpredictable impact of the newest entrant onto the Indian political scene: the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP = Common Man Party). In existence for only a year, the AAP has focused its

campaign on the elimination of corruption. Against all expectations, in India's capital, New Delhi, AAP, led by political neophyte Arvind Kejriwal, recently formed government with support from outside by the Congress.

In the wake of its unexpected success in Delhi, the AAP has hastily decided to make the most of the mood for change and contest seats across India. While it may only secure around 10 seats in parliament, mainly from Delhi and surrounding states, these may well come at the expense of the BJP.

With so many unknown factors at work, public opinion polls may once again prove to be a poor guide to the results of this year's general election.

It may well be that the outcome will not be known until days after the ballots are counted. In that case, only when the horse-trading between parties is completed will we know if Narendra Modi has been able to put together a governing coalition and install himself as India's next prime minister.

*Peter Mayer is an Associate Professor in the School of History & Politics, University of Adelaide.*

## New report addresses 'data deficit' on cultural links with Asia

Asia is a priority for more than 60 per cent of arts organisations in Victoria, according to a new report by [Asialink Arts](#) and [Arts Victoria](#).

The Victoria-Asia cultural engagement research report, *On the ground & in the know*, aims to address the 'data deficit' in relation to Australia's engagement with Asia in the cultural sector.



The objective was to gather data, evidence of best practice strategies and identify

the needs of key stakeholders, artists and arts organisations.

In their foreword to the report, the Chairman of Asialink, Sid Myer and the Director of Asialink Arts, Lesley Always, said one of the key recommendations arising from the research was the need for high-level leadership to advocate the value of cultural exchange between Australia and Asia, and its contribution to innovation and nurturing positive social, economic and cultural relationships.

'It is hoped that this challenge will be embraced by senior political, government, business and community leaders in order to encourage investment in Asia-Australia cultural exchange and build the Asia-capability of the Australian cultural sector,' they said.

'In particular there are opportunities for both the philanthropic and corporate sectors to contribute to the project.'

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)



# Abe and Yasukuni: the illogical politics of Japanese security policy

Shinzō Abe's recent visit to the Yasukuni Shrine could jeopardise Japan's strategic interests.

*By Rikki Kersten*

**W**hen Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December last year, it predictably caused outrage across the region. Many commentators described the visit as an act of provocation on the



Shinzō Abe

part of a diehard nationalist who was thumbing his nose at nations that had suffered Japanese invasion and atrocities during the Asia-Pacific war. Observers

assumed that there was a direct connection between Abe's unrepentant revisionism, and his intention to force Japan's defence and security policy in the direction of a more 'normal', full-fledged capability.

It is understandable to feel trepidation at the thought of what appears to be an unreconstructed militarist being in charge of creating a more assertive defence posture. This is especially unnerving when Japanese and Chinese paramilitary forces are engaged in cat-and-mouse manoeuvres in the East China Sea.

But are we correct in assuming that revisionism and 'normalisation' are entwined in this way in contemporary Japanese security policy? Where does the Yasukuni visit fit in Abe's elaboration of his security policy objectives? While Abe's pursuit of security policy development has been dogged and consistent, it also features an undercurrent of political illogic that interferes with the linear

association of revisionism and 'normalisation'.

The domestic political imperatives driving Abe's visit to the contentious Yasukuni Shrine as a serving prime minister are quite clear. Abe is at the beginning of the second year of a four-year term. This means that, given the electoral cycle, he does not have to face the voters now for another three years. In other words: he can afford to do what is difficult or unpopular now because he has time before the electorate can exact its revenge. The advent of an untimely election for the governor of Tokyo on 9 February (following the disgrace of former incumbent Inose) has messed with this situation, as Tokyo elections engage roughly 10 per cent of Japan's population and usually feature issues of national rather than purely local importance. But it seems that nuclear energy and social welfare are the frontrunner issues in that race.

Despite Abe's bluster of possessing a mandate to engage in what amounts to a normalisation agenda, security policy did not feature in his December 2012 electoral platform. Moreover, the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) landslide victory was more a product of opposition parties cancelling each other out, plus a healthy desire by voters to slap the Democratic Party of Japan for incompetence, rather than a resounding endorsement of Abe's LDP.

To put it another way: Abe's security policy objectives in the domestic arena are clear, but they cannot be described as representative or popular. Even the LDP's own coalition partner, the Komeito, has reservations about revising interpretations of the pacifist clause in the 1947 constitution.

Another domestic political imperative is the sequence of institutional reforms that Abe commenced in his first term in office in 2006–07 has continued with gusto as he enters the second year in his second administration.

Having set in place the legislative foundation for holding a referendum on constitutional revision in his first term, Abe has now put his foot down hard on the accelerator when it comes to institutionalising changes in Japan's security policy. The pace has been breathtaking: the National Defence Program Guidelines withdrawn and revised; a Secrets Bill forced through parliament in December 2013 in a manner reminiscent of the 1960 Security Treaty Crisis; formation of a National Security Council centred on the prime minister's office; a new National Security Strategy that re-purposes Japan's forces and hardware capabilities towards remote island defence and enhanced surveillance; and a clear declaration to revise interpretation of the constitution to allow Japan to participate in collective self-defence.

Buried within this plethora of security policy elaboration is something quite new for postwar Japan: securing greater offensive capability. This appears in the form of Japan creating its own marines, and considering the acquisition of cruise missile capability as a pre-emptive measure. Never has the line between defensive and offensive capability been so thin.

In the wake of the LDP's success in the 2013 half upper-house election, Abe can enact his policy agenda without fear of being blocked in that chamber. We know that the Komeito is not fully on board with Abe's entire suite of policy reforms, but Abe has already signalled in his January 2014 policy speech to parliament that he is willing to work with 'responsible opposition parties' (meaning Your Party and the Restoration Party) to secure political legitimacy for reinterpretation of the constitution.

He appears willing to risk the relationship with the LDP's coalition partner in order to get his way.

Despite Abe's long-cherished goal of full legitimacy for a 'more normal' defence capability for Japan that is underscored by constitutional revision and patriotic affirmation from society at large, it seems he has accepted the lesser option of constitutional revision by interpretation without popular support. This is because he knows that public opinion and political interests will not support constitutional revision via the parliamentary and referendum route for the foreseeable future.

But while the political logic driving



The Yasukuni Shrine. Abe's visit could have strategic consequences.

Abe at home seems clear enough, the picture blurs when we turn to the strategic consequences of his Yasukuni visit. In contemporary North-east Asia, Japan

requires two things: a firm ongoing commitment from the United States as Japan's primary security guarantor, and positive relations with regional nations in order to counterbalance China's growing weight in the region. Abe hopes to secure more autonomy for Japan as a security actor within the context of the US alliance system, but giving the United States reason to be disaffected with its ally Japan is surely not part of this picture.

Through the toxic combination of a revisionist questioning of Japan's wartime atrocities and a visit to a place that enshrines A-class war criminals and promotes an unrepentant version of war history in its museum, Abe has undermined his own strategic objectives. His Yasukuni visit has led to what Kazuhiko Togo describes as the encirclement of Japan by disaffected nations 'with China at the head of

that queue'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he has given the United States cause to regard its primary Asian ally as a security liability. The United States needs Japan to help manage China's rise and contribute to power-balancing, not provide China with cause to raise tensions even further.

And when we consider Abe's companion objective of legitimising patriotism in contemporary Japan, Abe must accept that in Japan today most citizens want Japan to be a peace-building nation. At the same time, many defence officials are running out of patience with the self-imposed constraints that prevent Japan from operating freely and responsibly in a difficult and threatening environment. This is particularly galling because, as no-one can dispute, Japan has been an exemplary contributor to world peace and stability since 1945.

Normalising Japan's defence capability should mean enhanced security for Japan and the international community. But the linear trajectory of Abe's revisionism as exemplified by his Yasukuni Shrine visit leads to isolationism and insecurity, which compromises the objective of normalisation. Nothing could be less in Japan's interests than this.

#### Reference

1. Togo Kazuhiko, 'Abe shusho no Yasukuni sanpai de sai-fujo shita sengo Nihon no "nejire" wo kaijo saseyo' (Let's eliminate the contortions of postwar Japan that have resurfaced with Abe's Yasukuni Shrine visit), *NEOS*, February 2014, p.57.

*Rikki Kersten is Dean of the School of Arts at Murdoch University in Western Australia, and a specialist in Modern Japanese political history and security policy.*

## Key speakers announced for ASAA conference

A distinguished South Korean diplomat and academic, and Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner, will be among key speakers at the ASAA's 20th biennial conference, at the University of Western Australia in July.

South Korea's Ambassador for National Security Affairs and Professor of International Relations



at Yonsei University, Professor Chung Min Lee (left), has agreed to speak at the Opening Plenary on 8 July.

Professor Lee is also Distinguished Professor in the Sir Walter Murdoch School of Public Policy and International Affairs, Murdoch University, and has written extensively on East Asian security, including strategic developments on the Korean peninsula.



Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner Dr Tim Soutphommasane (left) will speak at the Closing Plenary on 10 July. Prior to joining

the Australian Human Rights Commission in August 2013, he was a political philosopher at the University of Sydney.

The conference theme, 'AsiaScapes: contesting borders' will examine how globalisation has made contestation of national borders a key part of both lived realities and academic analysis. The conference will focus on both senses of border crossing—national and disciplinary—in a multipolar world.

Full details are available from the conference [website](#).

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

# The death of Jang Song-taek and the search for meaning

The purge of Jang Song-taek could be an opportunity for the West to change its approach to dealing with North Korea.

By Emma Campbell

Reading the many news reports and opinion pieces on the purge of Jang Song-taek, the uncle of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un, I am struck by the unwarranted confidence of some commentators in their assertions on the causes and consequences of this dramatic event. If there is one aspect of the story that we can be confident about, it is how little we can be certain of it.



Jang Song-taek

In a situation where there is so little information, then analysis and speculation is a legitimate exercise. Indeed, some of the proposed expert explanations for the purge are highly plausible. These

include struggles within the leadership over economic interests; an effort to consolidate power and challenge factions inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK); and a perceived threat from Jang's close relationship with China. Other, less plausible (although not necessarily impossible), explanations include a failed Jang-led coup against the leadership, or the possibility that 60-something Jang Song-taek had an affair with Ri Sol-ju, the wife of Kim Jong-un.

Perhaps the most interesting theory relates to the visit of the Mongolian president, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, late last year. President Elbegdorj made a speech to staff and students at Pyongyang's elite Kim Il-sung University where he stated 'I believe

in the power of freedom ... no tyranny lasts forever'.

According to one expert on North Korea, mystery still surrounds this visit. President Elbegdorj was not



Kim Jong-un.  
Photo: [US Bio](#)

granted an audience with Kim Jong-un, and it remains unclear who invited him. While there is no direct evidence linking this speech to the purge of Jang, it is interesting that the alleged execution took place soon after this controversial visit.

Despite the plausibility of the many explanations that have appeared in media and academic forums, put simply, we cannot be certain what happened to Jang, or why. We also cannot be certain of the implications. Jang's execution may signal instability within the regime, or it may suggest a strengthening of Kim Jong-un's power. It might suggest a calculated decision by Kim Jong-un to move away from economic and political reliance on China, or it may indicate a leader with poor judgement and a short temper. The world will eventually find out but it would be nice to be better prepared.

---

*The dearth of information becomes of increased concern with the growing possibility of instability in the North.*

---

The US administration recently hinted that it had discussed with the Chinese the issue of contingency planning in the event of the DPRK's collapse.

There are increasing calls in the United States for the Obama administration to initiate closer policy coordination with China. Privately,



diplomats talk of China's new concern over instability in the North. Yet there is little concrete information on what we will face and how we will manage it.

The policy and academic communities, for the most part, remain in the dark over much of the internal workings of the North Korean leadership. It is likely the Chinese authorities, or South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), have reliable insights into the internal events in the DPRK, but few of these insights are shared with the policy and academic community. Even if they were, we cannot assume these insights are always reliable since even the NIS has got it wrong on North Korea before. The most infamous case relates to Kim Jong-il's death, where the NIS was only able to confirm his passing when North Korea itself made an official announcement.

Moreover, the NIS's own authoritarian tendencies—a history of abuse and torture, the allegations of interference in the last presidential election, and a tendency to wrongly label North Korean refugees as spies—suggest that intelligence agencies might not be the best repositories for this kind of information if we hope to plan for a peaceful resolution to the seemingly intractable challenge that the North presents.

Indeed, the academic and public policy communities are so short of information on North Korea that the recent trips of former American basketball star Dennis Rodman have provided some constructive intelligence on the new leadership. These visits have helped to establish a fuller understanding of Kim Jong-un's lifestyle, personality, interests and priorities since his accession to power.

These visits have been a fascinating episode in the recent history of North Korea. It should be agreed, however, that a reliance on the promoter of Bad Boy Vodka and the author of

---

*A reliance on the promoter of Bad Boy Vodka and the author of I should be dead by now for information on the DPRK's leadership is an unsatisfactory situation.*

---

*I should be dead by now for information on the DPRK's leadership is an unsatisfactory situation.*

Certainly, we have more information on the North than ever before with the availability of satellite imagery, access to defectors living outside of the country, internet resources including North Korean television and newspapers, and humanitarian aid staff returned from working inside the DPRK. Many sources, however, remain unreliable and tainted by political bias. The deep uncertainty over Jang's death and the contradictory information and analysis show that there continues to be huge gaps in knowledge about the DPRK's politics, leadership, society and economy.



Dennis Rodman's visit provided intelligence on the new leadership.

The inability to fill these gaps has been worsened by the international community's ongoing policy of sanctioning and isolation of the DPRK. However, little attention has been paid to this side effect of the sanctions regime.

Closed diplomatic channels and an unwillingness to talk to North Korea without preconditions create severe impediments to accurately gauging the political climate in Pyongyang. The decline in humanitarian activities and other exchanges further narrows other channels for information and building understanding. It is thus unfortunate that the furore over the visits of Dennis Rodman and the criticism aimed at the Google boss Eric Schmidt and Governor Bill

Richardson following their DPRK trip are likely to dissuade other public figures from considering creative diplomatic initiatives with this isolated nation.

Perhaps the lack of information is a price worth paying for the implementation of sanctions aimed at curbing the North's nuclear ambitions. And with so little information, the purge of Jang Song-taek has given plenty of media opportunities to those of us brazen enough to think we know the answers.

However, If we want to understand the DPRK better, it means more interaction with North Koreans. That goes against the current trend of isolation.

If the unexpected and dramatic incident of Jang's purge tells us anything, it is that it might be time to change our priorities in our approach to dealing with the DPRK. It is time that the international community reconsidered their demands for the DPRK to meet pre-conditions before agreeing to diplomatic negotiations and it is time to consider new ways of re-engaging with this pariah nation.

*Dr Emma Campbell is a Korea Institute Postdoctoral Fellow at the Australian National University.*

## **In search of authenticity in Southeast Asia**

Contributions are invited for an edited volume that will explore the idea of authenticity in Southeast Asia.

The editors seek chapters of between 7000–9000 words drawing on case studies from Southeast Asia that examine the authenticity of phenomena such as social and religious movements, ethnicised discourses, lifestyles, social and political activism, online activity, culinary endeavours, and musical and other performances.

'Being authentic suggests a given behaviour or performance is reflective of a "trueness" or "genuineness" to one's identity,' said editor [Julian Lee](#) (RMIT University Melbourne). 'From a social science perspective there is sometimes scepticism about the historical faithfulness of purported behaviours.

'By exploring the dynamics at play in authenticity work, we hope to develop a fuller understanding of authenticity in the contemporary period and of an array of social phenomena.

'The significant exposure of much of Southeast Asia to Western cultural influences continues apace today with globalisation,' said Lee. 'This also exposes societies to foreign influences from within the region thus, conceivably, confounding attempts at expressions of authenticity.'

The closing date for abstracts and author's biographies is 30 May 2014. Decisions will be communicated by 30 June. A first draft of chapters will be required by 31 December 2014.

For further information, contact [Julian CH Lee](#) at [julian.lee@rmit.edu.au](mailto:julian.lee@rmit.edu.au) and co-editor [Marco Ferrarese](#) (Monash University Malaysia), or visit [this link](#).

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

# Long live the five-year plan!

The Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee has foreshadowed radical changes to China's domestic and international markets.

*By Hans Hendrischke*

Comments on last November's Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee have ranged from praise for its economic policies to criticism of, and disappointment at, the lack of specific policies and the slow progress of political reform.

The alternative view here, however, is that the new leadership used the plenum to prepare for the next five-year plan (2016–20) with radical plans that will change domestic and international markets by overhauling the public enterprise sector and the financial system, and by boosting rural development.

In the background, a political and legal system harking back to imperial bureaucratic traditions rather than the western separation of powers is also taking shape.

Three major documents emerged from the plenum: the communiqué, the decisions made at the plenum, and in a break with tradition, a personal statement by General Secretary Xi Jinping explaining his policies and the party rationale behind them.

In line with time-honoured party tradition, the communiqué praised the success of the meeting, but was short on detail. In contrast, the decisions listed in varying detail reforms in 60 policy areas.

To make sense of the third plenum one must take into account China's overlapping leadership and policy cycles.

Since 2002 the leadership has followed a 10-year cycle, while policies change in five-year cycles—

the five-year plans (FYPs)—and overlap the leadership cycles. New party and government leaders-in-waiting are groomed for their positions during the first half of a current FYP, before taking up their positions mid-cycle in a plan. Thus they share responsibility for implementing the ongoing FYP with the outgoing leadership.



Xi Jinping: broke with tradition and issued a personal statement.

At the end of the current FYP, and two-and-a-half years into their new positions, the new leadership will formulate their own FYP, which will fall fully within their term of office. At the end of this FYP, this group, after seven-and-a-

half years in office, will prepare its second FYP, which it will oversee for the initial years before handing authority over to next leadership group.

Thus, at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, in the middle of the 12th FYP (2011–15), the former leadership under party chief (general secretary) Hu Jintao and government chief (premier) Wen Jiabao handed power to the new leadership under General Secretary Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang.

Although the new leadership team will only come into its own with the 13th FYP (2016–20), preparations for the plan have already started.

Characteristically, FYPs are announced with great fanfare at the beginning of the plan period, or even some time into the plan. But the actual planning and trialling of new policies take shape during the final years of the previous plan, away from the glare of media attention.

The third plenum marks a watershed for the Xi Jinping leadership in the sense that this is the occasion for the

new team to formulate its political program and put into place the pilot projects and local experiments that precede the next FYP. This is the reason for the mixture of projections and ideas, policies and local experiments in the resolutions of the third plenum. As the contours of the next FYP take shape, the decisions indicate policy intent and priorities for the coming years rather than firm decisions.

As the third plenum was not a government plenum, but a policy plenum, preparing the party for the next FYP, its outcomes have to be read in this context. The target date of 2020 for realising the plenum's overall aims, as well as specific policies, is the last year of the 13th FYP period.

In the party's long-term planning, this will be the FYP for which the Xi Jinping/Li Keqiang leadership can claim full credit. The third plenum's decisions, and Xi Jinping's explanations in particular, provide the first comprehensive policy outlook over this time horizon.

Unequivocally, the priorities are economic—but they also cover political reform, culture, education and social welfare, social control and environment, and defence and party leadership.

### **Economic reforms**

In his statement, Xi Jinping put marketisation as his first priority. Markets are promised to replace the confiscation of land, administrative setting of interest rates in the finance industry, and bureaucratic approval of investment decisions.

The decisions list specific instances where the combination of market and administrative reforms will be disruptive, such as in land markets, finance, local protectionism and government approvals of investments—and even mention the need to 'smash' bureaucratic opposition to reform of intellectual property rights.

Market actors are Xi's second priority. His insistence on the ongoing role of state-owned enterprises (SOE) is accompanied by his surprising anticipation of unprecedented hybrid ownership structures that would reform SOEs from the inside by inserting private capital.

Vice versa, SOEs would be able to invest in private-sector enterprises. This would spell the end of the state-run model of SOEs by separating enterprise and government functions, by strengthening property rights, and through internationalisation. In this context, the suggestion that a greater proportion of SOE corporate earnings be used to fund social welfare seems less part of SOE reform than a signal that the central government is planning to strengthen its fiscal powers and central control over social welfare.

A practical aspect of SOE reform, linked to anti-corruption measures, is enterprise-based hiring and firing of top management, and salary levels comparable to the private sector.

Xi's third priority area, public finance, links central and local taxation and also addresses social welfare issues. Although the reforms to public and fiscal administration are outlined only in broad detail, reference to the complexity of the issues and to the interests of stakeholders such as local governments indicates that new reforms are being negotiated. Reforms to land titles and real estate markets will eat deeply into the revenue of local governments, and the promises of the central government that local governments will not be worse off fiscally do not sound convincing.

Xi's fourth priority area, rural reform, foreshadows major changes to the rural sector by addressing property rights. It includes detailed plans on the use of rural assets, particularly land, in order to attract finance for rural production, as well as incentives to attract private equity



and other forms of finance into the rural sector.

The final economic section in the decisions covers the internationalisation of the Chinese economy. It foreshadows, among other things, further opening of finance and the virtual lifting of all restrictions on Chinese outbound investment by enterprises and individuals.

### **Political reforms**

The fine-grained political reforms outlined in Xi's statement show a gradual movement towards alternatives to electoral democracy and rule of law, in particular to a strengthening of the supervisory and legislative function of central and local people's congresses. People's congresses are not elected but are linked to their popular constituency by an increasing variety of consultative mechanisms.

The decisions confirm the role of the congresses as supervisory bodies for all aspects of local administration, including the judiciary and the procurates. There is no space in this system for an independent judiciary and, in extension, no organisational underpinning of the rule of law in the western tradition, which requires separation of powers with judicial independence.

Instead, the section on the rule of law emphasises administrative and procedural aspects of the law. The strengthening of the rule of law refers to better administration and central-local coordination, and to curbing the illegal use of administrative powers.

The next section specifically places party members under legal constraints, but makes clear that the Communist Party has its own regulatory enforcement in the internal discipline inspection system at both central and local levels.

In terms of governance, the party's role as an independent organisation is, in part, akin to the traditional role

of the imperial censorate, which was 'charged with keeping all personnel and operations of the entire governmental mechanism (whether the court, the civil hierarchy, or the military hierarchy)' under surveillance. The social role of the party is to manage social peace and contradictions.

A separate section of the decisions contains a commitment to the environment and to market-based solutions to environmental problems. The final two sections cover defence and party building.

In summary, the third plenum's blueprint for the next FYP foreshadows a maturing of China's economic reform policies and a convergence with international norms in the area of property rights. Property rights and part-privatisation of the SOE sector are underpinning the reforms.

Property rights over rural land will open up finance channels for China's rural industries and local industrialisation in general, and the protection of intellectual property rights is now recognised as a precondition for commercial innovation.

Legal reforms are also part of new radical moves to attract and extend foreign investment, including China's own outbound investment.

Political reforms will consolidate what has been on the cards—a system of Chinese governance that gives exclusive power to the executive, which includes the judiciary, under the supervision of local and central people's congresses. De facto, and for all practical purposes, China will retain a highly decentralised system of governance.

*Hans Hendrichske is Professor of Chinese Business and Management at the University of Sydney.*

[\*BACK TO PAGE 1\*](#)

# Chinese without tears?

E-learning tools are promising a revolution in the way Chinese is taught.

*By Anne E. McLaren*

A year ago a keen student of Chinese at my university walked into my office, took out his smart phone, picked up a Chinese-language text at random from my bookcase, snapped a photo image of a page and then proceeded to 'read' the text with the aid of a digital dictionary.

In a typical translation class, students will now use Google Translate to provide a rough English draft which they will refine together with other students and the teacher. In a Chinese literacy class, students read their texts on an iPad or smart phone with the aid of an electronic dictionary. They switch on the inbuilt speaker to provide convenient voice-over to assist comprehension. The teacher encourages them to work together to analyse the syntax or discuss cultural context. In a beginners' class, students are learning the stroke order for the writing of Chinese characters using a commercial application on their mobile device. If they make a mistake, the software will automatically correct their efforts. Previous generations of western learners of Chinese can only look with envy at the insouciance with which this generation of techno-savvy students have embraced digital tools to assist their learning of this difficult language.

Do these digital tools promise a revolution in the teaching of Chinese or are they just another technological fix, one in a long line of technological advances, from tape recordings to the computer lab, which somehow or other never quite fulfil their promise to transform the nature of language learning? In a [thoughtful response](#) to this issue, Dean Ashendon agrees with those who are sceptical about

the effectiveness of digital technology as a determining factor in educational reform. At the same time, he believes that external pressures such as government policies, cost imperatives, market competition, and ever increasing technological advances will drive the trend to provide more educational value with fewer resources:

The digital technologies are now capable of doing in schooling what technology has been doing elsewhere for centuries: they can reallocate, amplify and, above all, substitute for labour.

Chinese is now a global language with huge numbers of non-Chinese people learning it. The largest increase is in learners from East Asia, who crowd into *Duiwai Hanyu* (Chinese for Foreigners) courses on Chinese campuses. In the United States, Chinese has become an increasingly popular language for high school instruction. A host of commercial applications have been developed by private companies to assist the would-be student of Mandarin Chinese. They bear bewildering titles such as PLECO (a type of South American fish), MDBG, KTDict, Mandarin Tools, HanPing and NCIKU, and are available at modest prices.

Of even greater significance than the development of digital tools is the emergence of private companies in China which bundle together popular e-learning tools to provide a program of sequenced Chinese language learning through the medium of totally online programs. Popular online programs include Chinese Horizon, ChinesePod, Hello Mandarin, New Concept Mandarin and Popup Chinese. These companies are commonly run by young expatriate western entrepreneurs who are Chinese learners themselves. While they mostly aim to service the western communities in China, their innovative packages provide an implicit competition to conventional

models. In fact, they deliberately seek to provide a 'fun' alternative to traditional in-class language teaching (derided on their websites as 'boring').

Online courses offer brief lessons using video clips with subtitles, voice-recording playback, Chinese language texts with electronic glosses, customised flashcard quizzes, and online forums to interact with fellow students or the tutor. A very attractive feature is the provision of regular Skype lessons one-on-one with an instructor based in China. The cost structure is one a language educator in the West can only dream of. ChinesePod, for example, offers five 20 minute Skype lessons with a native speaker per week, for three months, for a cost of US\$1199. This compares with the average Chinese lecturer in the West offering at most an hour a week of conversation instruction to a class of 20 or more at much higher cost. From the learner's perspective, the Skype lesson one-on-one would look a better deal. Further, some of these online programs can help with preparation for the HSK exam (the Chinese language TOEFEL) or offer customised programs such as Chinese for business purposes.

A very recent phenomenon is the merging of private agencies offering online language programs with mainstream educational institutions. Some Chinese online programs now offer managerial systems to enable teacher-administrators to customise online programs in line with the institutional curriculum and to use online analytics to monitor and assess student progress. For example, an American provider offers programs for schools with online lessons together with managerial systems and Skype link-ups with native speakers located in China. The China-based company, ChinesePod, lists on its website participating institutions such as the University of Sydney, Valpraiso University, Calvin College and Wellesley Public Schools.

At the time of writing it is too soon to say where these trends will lead. In most cases, educational systems are responding with the 'blended' classroom model, which combines online systems with classroom contact.

The next stage, as envisaged by Dean Ashendon, is a new type of digital learning platform where the teacher engages with students 'less like a pilot than an air-traffic controller' (e.g. 'Coming, ready or not'). At its best, this promises an entirely customised program that is infinitely adaptable to the progress of each individual student.

So far, the digital tools for Chinese will not replace the teacher in the classroom. The online dictionaries are a wonderful boon for vocabulary and character acquisition but much less so for mastery of syntax or cultural interpretation. Learning stroke order on one's phone does not entirely replace the need to write Chinese using pen and paper. Correction of learner pronunciation is not yet readily available in commercial applications. However, digital tools in hand-held devices can greatly alleviate the memory burden of learning a character-based language like Chinese, can convert a written text into a spoken one, and Chinese text into rough-and-ready English translation.

Technological advance has now reached the point where the main goal of the language program should not be limited to the acquisition of a certain language proficiency. Of even greater importance will be facility in e-learning methods and digital tools so that graduates can progress their skills beyond the classroom to their professional careers and life opportunities.

*Anne E McLaren is Professor of Chinese Studies, University of Melbourne.*

[\*BACK TO PAGE 1\*](#)

# Another year, another Kartini Day

Kartini's voice still speaks to the 21st century reader.

By Joost Coté

Come 21 April, Indonesians and Indonesianists throughout the world will recall the person of Raden Ajeng Kartini, Indonesia's first female *palawan nasional*, (national hero). Her image hangs in every elementary school in Indonesia—or used to.

Every schoolchild learns about Kartini and so every Indonesian knows her story—or should do. Each Kartini Day the Indonesian media poses the question: what significance does Kartini have for us today? The question, though, seems to be increasingly rhetorical. How, one might ask, could this rather worn-out textbook figure, used for a variety of political and ideological ends since the publication of an edited selection of her letters in 1911, still serve as a source of inspiration in a world of fading values?

One doesn't need to be an Indonesian nationalist, however, to feel moved when reading her passionate and often intimately confessional, and at other times sharply analytical and biting cynical, letters. Or need to be a dedicated feminist to appreciate the justice of her appeal for the rights of women. The clear voice that speaks through this writing, letters that often stretch to dozens of pages, readily draws the reader in.

Once beyond the niceties of late 19th century etiquette—here compounded by the colonial setting—it is the essential modernness of Kartini's voice that seems still able to speak to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader. But whether or not the historical figure of Kartini can, or should be, used for political purposes, or whether or not the letters themselves are still read, recognising her importance in Indonesian history should not be open to question.

Excavating the 'historical Kartini' from a century of accumulated commentary needs to begin with a recognition that what we know of



Portrait of Raden Ajeng Kartini (collection [Tropenmuseum](#))

Kartini derives from surviving correspondence published in 1911 (as *Door Duisternis tot Licht*) by colonial interests and intended for a Dutch readership to influence colonial policy. The first

tangible colonial 'use' of Kartini's letters was in 1913, to raise money to fund the first of a series of so-called 'Kartini Schools', a Dutch project. In the latter part of the century Kartini was performing an important political role for Indonesia's New Order government. However, these historical and political constraints cannot disguise the voice of the author, and a strong case can be made for situating Kartini (and her sisters) at the 'dawn of Indonesian nationalism'.

Kartini's correspondence grew out of an initial decision in 1898 to speak to a European public by participating in an Exhibition of Women's Work, the culmination of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch women's movement. This was followed by the publication of an article in a leading Dutch scientific journal, several literary pieces in Dutch and colonial women's periodicals and a lifelong (short as that turned out to be) correspondence on colonial politics. As this correspondence makes clear, discussion of her personal circumstances was intractably intertwined with broader political questions. While necessarily a discourse conducted in private, most of the approximately 150 surviving



letters and letter extracts engaged with a public discourse.

Internal evidence indicates that Kartini was in correspondence with a far wider range of recipients, European and Javanese, than extant letters might suggest. This included representatives of the *kaum muda*, the first generation of western-educated 'moderns' who, like Kartini, wanted to reform feudal society. With the 10 European recipients represented in the correspondence that has survived, she addressed colonial politics. Each of these represented, and was an influential figure in, the main ideological streams represented in contemporary Dutch discourse on colonial policy.

In their historical context, Kartini's act of writing represented a strategic attempt to influence this discourse, to gain support not just for her own ambitions for further study or for the rights of Javanese women—important as these goals were—but to gain recognition for the legitimacy of Javanese aspirations to autonomy. (The historical record shows that in this she failed: all but one of her correspondents rejected the idea of her studying in The Netherlands, and none believed Java to be ready to participate as an equal partner in its own development.)

Although her writing focuses on a Javanese future, at a time when the modern notion of Indonesia had yet to emerge, her letters already reveal a consciousness of a *volk* (a people) and of a *natie* (nation)—a possible imagined political community of the colonised. As such, the correspondence is unique, as a set of historical documents, in being a record of the political voice of a woman: it is another decade before we find the political agenda that Kartini outlined in her letters and memoranda replicated in surviving documentation authored by Indonesian men. Even then, education and the rights of women

fail to appear among their priorities. It is no surprise to learn that after her death, Kartini's sisters, who had participated in the discussions that gave rise to the correspondence, would be among the first female members of *Budi Utomo*, Indonesia's first proto-nationalist organisation—only to resign a year later in protest of its takeover by conservative interests.

Kartini was among the first to articulate what can be regarded as a modern Indonesian cultural nationalism (her sisters and brother were others). Her study of the West, evidenced by her Dutch language library that included the latest Dutch and international feminist, socialist and literary works of the day, supplemented by regular reading of newspapers and cultural journals, provided the platform and the tools with which she attempted to educate the coloniser. She defined the contemporary significance of Javanese arts and crafts through her work in opening up traditional wood carving to European consumption. She and her sisters urged the development of Javanese art and drawing, of music and culinary arts. Her published short stories can be counted as among the first contributions to modern Indonesian literature.

Understanding the past in a postcolonial age through a reading of these letters remains, I think, a worthwhile enterprise. And given the recovery recently of a further batch of previously unknown letters by Kartini's sisters (which can, hopefully, be made public soon), there may be more reading ahead!

*Dr Joost Côté is Senior Research Fellow (History) in the School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies, Monash University.*

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

# Sydney's booming Chinatown

Chinatowns around the world are in decline—but Sydney's is defying the trend.

By Alexandra Wong

A recent article in the London *Financial Times* reported on the perceived decline of what we have come to know as Chinatowns around cities in the West:

Historically, Chinatowns have been a distinctive feature of many city centres, seemingly impervious to gentrification and constantly rising property prices. But Mr Chen is voicing a fear, felt in Chinatowns from London to San Francisco, that the struggle to keep up with rising rents and other challenges will prompt these vibrant communities to disappear.



Entrance of Chinatown. Photograph by John Marmaras. Source: City of Sydney.

In typical orientalist fashion, the article describes a Chinatown as a 'colourful, lantern-laced street', with businesses operating there being 'noodle bars', 'English school' and 'job centres'. Chinese immigrants were characterised as subject to racial discrimination from the 'host country' (in this case, the raiding of the UK Border Agency to crackdown on illegal workers) and as marginalised 'poor residents' who were being squeezed out to the suburbs.

In other words, Chinatowns are still framed in the classic 'ethnic enclave' perspective, as if they have remained unchanged since the last century.

In our current Australian Research Council-funded project on Sydney's Chinatown, we aim to question this outdated ethnic enclave paradigm and shed light on the way Chinatowns have evolved and changed in the globally interconnected world of the 21st century.

In this project, conducted in partnership with the City of Sydney, professors [Ien Ang](#), [Donald McNeill](#), [Kay Anderson](#) and I are exploring a number of economic and cultural dynamics driven by the forces of globalisation that have been shaping the latest transformation of Sydney's Chinatown.

Defying the narrative of decline, Sydney's Chinatown has shown rapid expansion and renewal, with the number of Chinese migrating to Australia from China in recent times increasing significantly. [Census data in 2011](#) showed that the China-born population in Australia has increased 123 per cent compared to a decade ago. Sydney's Chinatown—a long-standing popular entry point for Chinese migrants—recorded a 168 per cent growth in Chinese population in the decade since 2001

(ABS [2011](#) and [2001](#)).

Due mainly to changes in Australia's immigration policy in the late 1990s to favour skilled and business migrants, these recent Chinese migrants are remarkably different from earlier Chinese settlers, who originated mainly from



Laneway arts in Chinatown. Photograph by Paul Patterson. Source: City of Sydney

southern China. With their professional background and financial resources, they have made a significant impact on the urban development of Sydney, in particular on the real estate market.

Ethnic entrepreneurs have leveraged their transnational networks and successfully attracted investors from China to develop and purchase high-rise apartments in and around Chinatown. In that sense, Chinese immigrants have become intermediaries between China and Australia, facilitating the transnational capital flow between the two countries.

Such China–Australia transnational linkages are also exemplified in the increasing number of Chinese tourists and international students. According to [figures from Destination NSW](#), China was the largest source market for international visitors to New South Wales in 2013, accounting for 13.8 per cent of the total number of international visitors. China was also the [largest source country for international students](#) in 2013, [accounting for 30 per cent](#) of international students in New South Wales.

Given its cultural proximity to China and the absence of a language barrier there, Chinatown [has been visited](#) by over 50 per cent of the visitors, making it one of the top three tourist attractions for shopping, dining and cultural activities in Sydney.

Meanwhile, many other Asian migrants such as Koreans, Thais and Indonesians have also moved into the area since the 1990s. The critical mass of Asian businesses and customers caused not only an expansion of Chinatown's physical boundary, but also transformed Chinatown from a homogenous Chinese enclave to a vibrant multicultural hub that embraces a hybrid mix of Asian ethnicities and cultures.

---

*The critical mass of Asian businesses and customers has transformed Chinatown from a homogenous Chinese enclave to a vibrant multicultural hub.*

---

Recognising the importance of Chinatown in terms of promoting ethnic diversity and economic growth, the City of Sydney has given Chinatown priority in its latest urban development agenda, with a number of initiatives to improve the area's attractiveness through a major public domain plan (2009) and public art plan (2010). An intensive marketing campaign also has been launched to promote Chinatown as a character precinct for Asian cuisine and cultural experience in the city.

The growing ties between China and Australia have posed numerous opportunities and challenges to Australia. However, a cultural gap still exists among the general public about their understanding of modern China. Sydney's Chinatown is in a good position to deepen our knowledge about the complex and changing nature of Sino–Australian relations.

To that end, the ultimate objective of our project is to illuminate the local impact of macroprocesses of globalisation and its implications for Australia's future in the 'Asian century' through a reconceptualisation of Sydney's Chinatown in the 21st century.

*Dr Alexandra Wong is a research associate at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney*

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

# Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia one year old and growing fast

An ambitious project to digitise Chinese Buddhist resources celebrates its first year.

By Marju Broder

The end of 2012 marked an important milestone in academic Buddhism. During the Pacific Neighbourhood Consortium Annual Conference, held at Berkeley University on 7–9 December, Vello Vaartnou, a Buddhist monk from Australia, launched his voluminous new project, an online Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia.

It has taken Vaartnou many years to accumulate the knowledge and merit to start such a massive undertaking—one that is expected to continue long after most of our lifetimes.

Vaartnou has been a dedicated Buddhist for over 40 years and has educated people in Buddhism in many countries. He established the practical Buddhist tradition in Estonia during Soviet times, when religious activity was punishable, and introduced the first Buddhist objects into the Estonian intellectual and religious landscape. He has translated Buddhist books and texts, built stupas, prayer wheels and temples. In 1988 he established the first opposition party against communists in the 70-year history of the Soviet Union before being expelled from the country.

Vaartnou is the author of two online Buddhist encyclopedias, the founder of two annual international Buddhist conferences, in Europe and Australia, and is an internationally recognised *thangka* (a painting on cotton, or silk appliqué, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala of some sort) master.

Since 2010 he has been developing international educational projects in Australasia, initiating the international Buddhism & Australia conferences, an online *History of Buddhist Australia*, exhibitions and an online Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia.

The first entries for the [Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia](#) were posted in December 2012. Since then the encyclopedia has grown to 20 000 articles in English and 4000 in Chinese. Vaartnou continues his work on the project, already considered

one of the biggest online resources on Buddhism.

Speaking on the first anniversary of the *Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia*, Vaartnou outlined his plans to develop the encyclopedia in different languages.



Vaartnou opening the first Buddhism and Australia conference in 2012.

‘I see it evolving into a world Buddhist encyclopedia, with sub-encyclopedias containing information about Buddhism by country and language,’ he said.

The encyclopedia has many stages of development—collecting and posting all existing digitised materials; digitising additional historical texts, documents and materials; and creating and promoting new forms of Buddhist education.

The encyclopedia currently has 36 categories with over 1400 sub-categories as well as Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese and Zen dictionaries.





Chinese Buddhism has a rich and colourful history and presence. China has a large amount

of varying Buddhist materials, including texts, chronicles, commentaries from practitioners, sutras, tantras, paintings, sculptures, temples, shrines, monasteries. Numerous different Buddhist traditions are still practised in China, which results in even more variety in available Buddhist materials from there.

'China has one of the biggest populations of Buddhists in the world,' Vaartnou said. 'Along with its significant and increasing global influence, it has great potential to preserve and develop the Buddhist tradition, and to influence the development of Buddhism globally.'

---

*if Buddhism doesn't adapt to this changing scenario it risks becoming irrelevant.*

---

'To maximise the impact on more Buddhist readers around the globe, I've started the online *Buddhist encyclopedia of China*, in both Chinese and English. The encyclopedia introduces different aspects and approaches, and will not exclude any Buddhist materials that are not directly related to China,' he said.

Vaartnou said the encyclopedia created an advanced online source of Buddhist knowledge by bringing together Buddhists, academics, students and organisations.

'There's a great gap between Chinese and English-speaking Buddhists, and the encyclopedia provides an opportunity to learn and study Buddhism in English and Chinese and

in many more languages in the future,' he said.

The huge amount of work on compiling the encyclopedia has been done by Vaartnou and one volunteer working 16 to 18 hour days. The project has been entirely funded to date by Vaartnou himself.

Vaartnou emphasises that the encyclopedia's key aim is preservation.

'The online world poses a potential threat to traditional forms of Buddhist materials,' he said.

'In addition, if Buddhism doesn't adapt to this changing scenario it risks becoming irrelevant.'

'The influence of the internet has been dramatic over the past 20 years, but it also has a potentially negative dimension, including repetitive and flawed information and incorrect terminology.'

But these changing times also provide new opportunities; *the Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia* is just one example of how these changes can be skilfully used to the advantage of Buddhism.'

Vaartnou plans to visit Taiwan, Mongolia and Bhutan soon to discuss the further development of the project.

*Marju Broder is the Secretary for the International Conference Buddhism & Australia and of the Chinese Buddhism encyclopedia project.*

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

# China's return to nature

Australia has much to offer as the Chinese discover the great outdoors.

By Gary Sigley

**W**e're now aware, either through firsthand experience or media reports, that the air quality in China's major cities is abominable. The deterioration in the quality of the environment is, in turn, contributing to the development of numerous social issues and cultural trends.

Of particular interest is the growth of trends associated with a 'return to nature', manifest as an active engagement with the outdoors. A number of central elements make this possible.

First, is the rapid development of a relatively affordable and efficient national transport network that can provide access to once-remote parts of China. Over the past 30 years, but especially the past two decades, Chinese authorities have invested heavily in building a national transport infrastructure. Through an ever-growing network of expressways, airports, high-speed rail and so on, it is now possible to escape the city for a few days respite to what were once regarded as remote and inaccessible regions—including places now within just a few hours drive of a major urban centre.

Second, greater disposable incomes and the growth of budget travel and accommodation, as well as the rise of the privately owned automobile, have made travel for leisure more affordable and widespread. The mass tourism industry has provided the platform for the emergence of a more diverse tourism market, including the growth of the independent traveller and, in particular, the budget backpacker.

Third, the crowded, polluted and alienating urban environment is

pushing those who can afford to out to the countryside for respite. The pollution and congestion in the cities generate a desire for clean air, blue skies and pleasant vistas. Other factors such as food safety and a sense of alienation in the rat race also play into this trend.

---

*As with everything in China, the pace and scale of the growth in the 'donkey friends' group has brought more challenges than many anticipated.*

---

Fourth, the emergence of social networking platforms has made the sharing of itineraries and group travel organisation fast and efficient. The widespread use of social networking platforms such as QQ and WeChat enable the sharing of information with fellow travellers in ways that are encouraging new forms of self-development as outdoor enthusiasts seek challenging situations to prove their mettle. These platforms also provide individuals the opportunity to share information and form social groups that disrupt the conventional travel-for-leisure model, which relies heavily on mass travel and mass tourism providers.

The ever-growing number of Chinese heading to the countryside and wilderness to embrace nature and promote self-development are known as the 'donkey friends' (*lvyou* 驴友), a pun on the Chinese term for travel or tourism (*lvyou* 旅游).

In the 1990s the first donkey friends, typically university students or young white-collar workers, began to escape the cities for a few days hiking. Over time, clubs were formed. Some were officially registered, but more often than not they were nothing more than a

natural coming together of likeminded individuals. Some clubs now have more than one million members and act as semicommercial travel companies. The trickle has become a torrent.

As with everything in China, the pace and scale of the growth in the 'donkey friends' has brought more challenges than many anticipated. The great irony is that, in seeking to escape the polluted and congested cities, the donkey friends are taking pollution and congestion with them into the mountains. With the ease of information-sharing in this digital age, a hiking or outdoor recreation destination that may have experienced only a handful of hikers each year can suddenly be inundated with hundreds, if not thousands, of hikers.

Unfortunately, many local government authorities and communities don't have the time, skills or resources to deal with the sudden influx of visitors, other than to take advantage of the opportunity to erect a gate to collect entrance fees. Otherwise, the destinations frequented by hikers are poorly managed and suffer from lack of proper waste management and from trail degradation. A more serious issue is the lack of safety awareness and preparation among hikers. This is leading to regular media reports of lost hikers, and fatalities are also quite common.

Having noted these trends and issues from the sidelines for some years (while also collecting information) some colleagues and I decided to take action by convening the inaugural Australia-China and the Great Outdoors workshop last September. The workshop, held at the University of Western Australia, was sponsored by an outdoor equipment supplier, Osprey (China), and an outdoor adventure group, Peak Adventure Travel.

It was attended by outdoor tourism providers, government regulators and hiking and outdoor enthusiasts

from China and Australia. It also included taking a select group of Chinese outdoor tourism providers and donkey friends on a trek along Western Australia's famous Bibbulmun Track (see [full report](#)).

As a nation with decades of experience in managing the outdoors, Australia has much it can share with China. Many of the Chinese donkey friends will, in time, want to explore opportunities for ecotourism and adventure travel in places like Australia.



Chinese outdoor tourism providers and 'donkey friends' on a trek along Western Australia's Bibbulmun Track last September. Photo: Ed Jocelyn.

This year, the workshop will become a forum, to be held on location in Southwest China. Through these efforts we hope to establish a dialogue and information-sharing platform which, over time, will have a positive impact on China's outdoor and hiking destinations.

With so much news about China's pollution problem, it's easy to overlook the country's vast areas of natural beauty. We hope to work with the like-minded to preserve these assets for future generations.

*[Gary Sigley](#) is Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Western Australia.*

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)

## Bulletin board

### Extension for abstract submissions for ASAA 14



8-10 July 2014 • University of Western Australia

The closing date for abstract and

panel submissions for the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) 20th biennial conference (ASAA 14) has been extended until 28 February.

The conference will be held at the University of Western Australia, from 8 to 10 July 2014.

See [conference website](#) for further information.

### Postgraduate conference awards

The ASAA is offering 10 awards for postgraduate students to attend ASAA 14. Valued at \$1100, each award provides registration for the workshop and conference, accommodation for five nights in a university college, and attendance at the conference dinner.

Applicants must be ASAA members who, at the time of application, are enrolled at an Australian university in a postgraduate program with a thesis component. They must attend the postgraduate workshop on 7 July and the conference from 8–10 July, and present a paper to the conference.

Further details on how to apply are available on the [ASAA website](#).

Applications should be emailed to the ASAA Secretary, [Dr Amrita Malhi](#), by 14 March. Awards will be decided by early April.

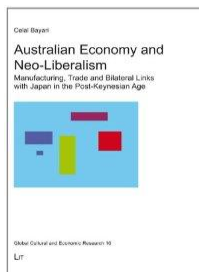
### Sponsorship Opportunities

ASAA 2014 is seeking to partner with a range of sponsors to create a world-class event for Western Australia. Individually tailored sponsorship opportunities will be available.

Because major partnerships are limited, they will be offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Some individual partnerships are also available, including the opportunity for advertising and satchel inserts. The organisers will be pleased to tailor a suitable package for you.

For further information on sponsorship and trade opportunities contact:  
ASAA 2014 Conference Secretariat  
EECW Pty Ltd  
T: +61 8 9389 1488  
F: +61 8 9389 1499  
E: [info@eecw.com.au](mailto:info@eecw.com.au)

## New books on Asia



**Australian economy and neo-liberalism: manufacturing, trade and bilateral links with Japan in the post-Keynesian age.**  
By Celal Bayar,  
232 pp, paperback, Lit Verlag, Berlin. \$53.71

This book by the author of *Japanese hybrid factories in Australia: the Japanese system transferred* (2011) discusses the history of Australian neoliberalism and the economic relations with Japan in the era of post-Keynesian economics.

It presents the history of the rise and decline of Japanese interests in Australian manufacturing in the context of Cold War economic relations, and the consequent modifications, and analyses the reasons behind the continuation of the bilateral trade.

The book states that Australia's dependence on foreign investment in resources, energy exports, and manufacturing has not always ensured a stable economic growth.

### ASAA series

**Southeast Asia Series:** research on countries and peoples of Southeast Asia.

**Women in Asia Series:** promotes scholarship for women in Asia.

**East Asia Series:** principally concerned with the East Asian region (China, Japan, North and South Korea and Taiwan).

**South Asia Series:** research on the countries and peoples of South Asia across a wide range of disciplines.

## Coming events

**Non-Han Chinese diasporic communities beyond China, Canberra, 4–5 April 2014.** Organised and sponsored by the College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, and the Center for International Migration Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, the conference will examine aspects of the Chinese diaspora. Further information: [Li Tana](#), [Nicholas Farrelly](#), [Zhang Zhenjiang](#), or [Geoff Wade](#) (conference secretary).

**12th International Conference on Thai Studies, Sydney, 22–24 April 2014.** The triennial conference will be held at the University of Sydney and will adopt the theme 'Thailand in the world'. Further details from the [conference website](#).

**Excellence in Professional Practice conference: Teachers driving school improvement. Melbourne, 16–17 May 2014,** organised by the ACER Institute. See [website](#).

**'Fighting women' during and after the Second World War in Asia and Europe, conference, The Netherlands, 12–13 June, 2014,** The Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam.

**New world. New thinking. Asia Education Foundation national conference, Sydney, 16–18 June 2014.** See [website](#) for details.

**EduTECH national conference and expo, Brisbane, 3–4 June 2014.** See [website](#).

**ASAA 2014 Biennial Conference, 8–10 July 2014.** The 20th ASAA biennial conference, *Asiascapes: contesting borders*, will be held at the University of Western Australia, Perth. See [conference website](#).

**Inaugural AAS-in-Asia conference, Asia in motion: heritage and transformation, National University of Singapore, 17–19 July 2014.** Further information available from [conference website](#).

**Activated borders: re-openings, ruptures and relationships, 4th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, Hong Kong, 8–10 December 2014.** See [website](#) for further details.

**International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS 9), 5–9 July 2015. Adelaide Convention Centre.** See [website](#) for further information, or contact the convenor, [Dr Gerry Groot](#).

## ASAA news

Applications for the 2014 funding round of the [Event Funding Scheme](#) are open to ASAA members who wish to organise a workshop, symposium or conference that will be of interest and value to other ASAA members and the broader scholarly community.

The ASAA expects to fund up to two events, to an amount capped at \$10 000 per event, for events scheduled in 2015.

Preference will be given to events that are timed to immediately precede, follow or coincide with the International Convention of Asia Scholars 9, scheduled in Adelaide from 5 to 9 July, 2015.

Applications should be submitted to [secretary@asaa.asn.au](mailto:secretary@asaa.asn.au) by 31 July 2014.

## About the ASAA

The [ASAA](#) was founded in 1976 to promote and support the study of Asia in Australia. Its membership is drawn mainly from academic staff and students at Australian universities, but it also takes a strong interest in Asian Studies and the use of Asia-related materials in schools, and in Australian attitudes to and policies towards Asia.

The association supports two refereed journals, the *Asian Studies Review* and the *e-Journal of foreign language teaching*. It holds a biennial academic conference which offers members and other scholars the opportunity to hear the latest in research and to develop contacts with other scholars.

It also sponsors four book series, covering [Southeast Asia](#), [South Asia](#), [East Asia](#), and [Women in Asia](#), and makes regular submissions to governments and universities on issues of importance to Asian studies. [JOIN NOW](#).

## Asian Studies Review

[Asian Studies Review](#) is a multidisciplinary journal of contemporary and modern Asia. The journal sets out to showcase high-quality scholarship on the modern histories, cultures, societies, languages, politics and religions of Asia through the publication of research articles, book reviews and review articles. The journal is associated with the [Asian Studies Association of Australia](#). All research articles have undergone rigorous peer review, based on initial editor screening and refereeing by two anonymous referees.

*Asian Currents* is edited by [Allan Sharp](#). Unsolicited articles of between 850–1000 words on any field of Asian studies are welcome and will be considered for publication.

*Asian Currents* is published 6 times a year (February, April, June, August, October, December). Articles and notices should be submitted by the 10th of the month of publication.

[BACK TO PAGE 1](#)