



### **Tune Review of the National Archives of Australia**

The Asian Studies Association of Australia is pleased to be able to contribute to TUNE Review of the National Archives of Australia (NAA). The ASAA (est. 1976) is the peak body of university educators and experts on Asia in Australia. For over 4 decades the ASAA has promoted and supported the study of Asia in Australia. Our membership is drawn mainly from academics and research students but also includes industry and government Asia experts. We provide commentary to the broader public through our bulletin [Asian Currents](#) as well as specialist academic research papers through our journal [Asian Studies Review](#). Our biennial conferences provide forums for collaboration and knowledge dissemination—our 2018 conference hosted by the University of Sydney attracted nearly 1000 delegates.

The ASAA has sustained interest in (1) promoting knowledge of Australia's relationships with the Asian region, (2) modelling excellence in research management and materials collections in research in the Indo-Pacific, (3) promoting student and academic knowledge about the range and quality of research materials available and how best to use them, (4) the production of world-leading research on Asia with an Australian perspective. ASAA members have been active users of the National Archives of Australia and regularly provide advice to colleagues from Asia about how to make best use of our National repositories—including Canberra-based institutions like the National Film and Sound Archive, the National Library and the NAA.

#### NAA's role as a model of best-practice transparency in governance in the Indo-Pacific region

The ASAA regards the NAA as central to achieving Australia's role in advancing strong governance and mature civil societies in the Indo-Pacific region. As a middle-power with extensive expertise and connections to the nations in the region, Australia is uniquely placed to model the value of best practice in accountability, transparency and integrity in government. Our researchers work in many parts of the world where access to basic historical documents is restricted, where archives are closed to the public, or where materials are censored, left to degrade or 'lost'. We are acutely aware of the threat to civil society that accompanies these restrictions on open public access to official documents. With regards to the NAA, historians have reported increasingly restrictive decisions including redacting or withholding of materials after the expiration of the 50-year restriction rule. Given many of these files have no relevance for present government, we consider these decisions as detrimental to our democracy. In future, in

order to model best practice for the archives of a democratic society we hope clearance processes will not only be expedited, but also made more liberal.

ASAA members recommend that the NAA be appropriately funded so that we can model best-practice in materials management and open dissemination to nurture democratic openness in our region and our nation. We see the restrictions on NAA funding as being a fundamental threat to Australian democracy and also to our standing and reputation in the world and in the Asian region specifically.

In order to remain a model for the region, the NAA needs to adopt improved processes. Benchmarking internationally shows that the National Archives of Australia is slow and the processes used cumbersome in comparison with US and other national archives. This has resulted in post-graduate students choosing to research topics that do not require NAAA access, as they can guarantee access to records elsewhere and complete their research in a timely manner. Unless the process is revised, the delay in making available archives will have a serious, detrimental and long term impact on research undertaken on Australian Asia related topics.

#### NAA's role as supports for the archives in the Indo-Pacific

The NAA has an important role in supporting the emergence of best-practice materials collections, management and access protocols for their many, and expanding, counterparts in Asia. Our national expertise should be made readily available to Indo-Pacific counterparts through regular dialogues, information sharing and collections development. Without adequate funding, the NAA cannot be the regional leader in information management that it naturally should be.

#### NAA's significance in promoting Australian perspectives around the Indo-Pacific

Australia's information institutions, specifically the NAA, are crucial in providing broad global access to the Australian perspective on social, political and economic development. Researchers who are unable to easily access materials that outline the history and evolution of Australia's many innovative policy achievements, our significant innovations in technology and unique perspectives on global events, will simply go elsewhere. Australia risks becoming irrelevant in global discussions if we do not facilitate easy access to our materials and promote access to our uniquely Australian contributions.

#### The need for greater funding for the NAA

Despite the rich Asia related collections of the NAA it appears under-funded in terms of human resources. This underfunding has adverse impacts on researchers and on our regional reputation. Researchers report waits of 2-4 years, by which time books and articles on cognate topics but drawing on sources elsewhere have already been published. There are also major problems caused by such delays for researchers who find themselves unable to acquit grants from bodies such as the Australian Research Council.

We encourage greater investment in human resources to speed up the wait times for open period files and files requiring access permission.

The dramatic increase in the cost of digitising files is also limiting the availability of material for many researchers especially PhD and ECR scholars who have limited access to funds. We recommend more support for funding digitisation and ensuring greater affordability and accessibility of these archives.

The ASAA is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important review of a significant institution of national, regional and global importance.

**Prepared on behalf of the ASAA membership by the Council, June 28 2019**