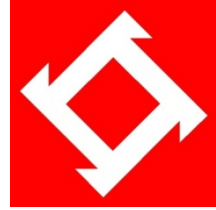


ASIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

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To: Dr. Marie-Louise Ayres

Director-General, National Library of Australia.

22 May 2020

Dear Dr Ayres,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the NLA's new Collection Development Policy (draft dated 24 April 2020) and Collecting Strategy 2020-21 – 2023-24. I am providing you the following input on behalf of officeholders and members of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, the peak body of Asian Studies scholars in Australia, and following consultation with allied associations of scholars of China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Mainland Southeast Asia, and South Asia, as well as a range of academics, students and librarians with specialist Asia knowledge. At the end of this letter you will find a list of names of scholars and others who have endorsed the letter.

We are pleased to note that the Policy states (p. 6) that "Collecting from and about the countries of Asia and the Pacific is the Library's highest priority after its Australian collecting responsibilities", and we acknowledge that the Library "aims to maintain a level of curatorial focus on collecting from Indonesia, China, Timor-Leste and the Pacific." As I have indicated in my previous correspondence with you, the Association views the Asia collections of the library as a significant national asset. They are not only a treasure for Asia researchers, but also an important symbol of the seriousness with which our country views its place in the region. It is reassuring to see that Asia and the Pacific will continue to be a focus of the Library, and, in particular, that the Library will continue to focus its collecting strategy on the three named countries, each of which is important to Australia.

However, two aspects of the new policy documents are matters of profound concern, namely:

1. The narrowing of the country focus.
2. Signals of reduced emphasis even on countries that remain a focus.

The first issue has been foreshadowed in earlier communications between us. As you know, the previous Collection Development Policy (2016) stated that the Library prioritised collecting from the following countries: “China, Japan, Korea and, within South-East Asia: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia and East Timor.” The current document removes Japan, Korea, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar from this list of priority countries.

This narrowing of focus is extremely regrettable and amounts to the abandonment of the Library’s long-held goal of sustaining a broad collection on East and Southeast Asia. Had we not been forewarned by earlier communications from you, news of such a far-reaching change would have been profoundly shocking. As you know, the NLA has among the world’s best collections on the countries removed from the list of priorities. These collections have been built over many years of sustained effort, and include vast collections on countries of major importance to Australia. For instance, the deleted countries include two of the top four trading partners of Australia in 2019 (Japan and Korea). And while the strategic and cultural importance of China is clear, the sole emphasis on China in the Northeast Asian region is not: it is not possible to truly understand China’s role in regional matters without access to materials from Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia. Collecting on the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, meanwhile, is very patchy in both home-country and other international collections; online options there are also very limited while political conditions make it especially important to build up significant collections outside the region.

On the second point, we are concerned to detect wording that suggests future reductions even in collecting from the countries - Indonesia, China, and Timor-Leste – that are retained as priorities. Such statements include the warning on p. 34 that “Individual country collecting is subject to change, according to social or political factors, changes in research focus and Library priorities and resources” and, even more worryingly, your statement in your cover email that “We are not yet in a position to indicate how ‘representative’ or ‘selective’ [...] our collecting from China, Indonesia, the Pacific, or any other parts of Asia will be. You can, however, expect significant reductions, in line with a very significant reduction of the Collection staffing cohort from July this year.” The importance of these countries to Australia can hardly be overstated; there should be no reduction in collecting from them.

On a different point, the new Collection Development Policy raises the matter of coordination with university libraries. On p. 33, in the context of a discussion of the collecting of overseas publications, it includes the following statement:

“The Library does not collect narrowly with the aim of supporting particular scholarly interests, but aims to build collections useful to a broad cross-section of the community. The Library’s constrained resources mean that it can no longer build, maintain or provide access to collections that align exclusively with the needs of academic researchers and students; it expects universities to meet these obligations.”

With respect to this passage, allow me to make two observations:

First, it is an expression of unrealistic optimism bordering on wilful blindness to imagine that universities and their libraries will be able to step in to fill all the gaps opened by the

changes to the Asia collecting strategy. As you and your colleagues must surely know, Australian university libraries have themselves been under great financial pressure for an extended period and, in most cases, have been reducing rather than expanding their Asia collecting. These pressures can be expected to reach crisis proportions given the financial collapse of the Australian tertiary education sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The narrowing of the NLA's Asia collecting strategy will mean that many of the resources currently collected by the NLA will be lost to Australia. Universities will not be able to fill all the gaps opened by this policy change. No Australian university has the resources or focus, for example, to devote major collecting to countries such as Cambodia, Laos or even Myanmar. Only a National Library has the scope and mandate to act in the broad national interest and collect such material.

This brings me to the second point: it should be stressed that the importance of a rounded Asia collection in our country's National Library goes far beyond the sectional interests or "needs" (as the document puts it) of a group of scholars and students. On the contrary, these collections have been developed over successive generations in recognition that building deep knowledge of our Asian neighbourhood is important to our national interest. Since early in the post-World War II period, successive federal governments have recognised that Australia's geographical location and growing engagement with our region calls for more knowledge of, and expertise on, Asia. The importance of Asia to Australia's future continues to be strongly articulated by national governments (most recently in the 2016 Defence and 2017 Foreign Policy White Papers). The National Library of Australia's Asia collections should be understood in this context. They have been developed as an articulation of Australia's national interest. They are not there merely to service "the needs of academic researchers and students", even if such persons make up a significant proportion of the users of these collections.

Indeed, given the growing importance for Australia of the countries of South Asia – India and Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka – which represent a quarter of the world's population, a strong case could be made that now is a time to expand rather than shrink the NLA's Asia collecting strategy. India, in particular, is recognised as being crucial to Australia's economic and strategic future, yet the NLA's South Asia collections have not been strong historically, and are now being further diminished.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that my colleagues and I recognise that these changes are made in a context of diminishing resources. As the Collecting Development Policy notes (p. 2) "declining staff and financial resources [have] placed considerable strain on the Library's acquisition processes". It is a matter of profound regret that the Federal Government has not provided the resources needed for the Library to maintain its Asia collecting strategy at previous levels while also discharging its duties to build its Australian collections.

We particularly regret that such a massive and fundamental reduction in the NLA's Asia collecting strategy should occur a time when the importance of Asia to Australia's economic future is greater than ever, when the rise of China is reconfiguring the balance of power throughout the continent with obvious implications for Australia, and when we are reeling

from a global pandemic that originated in the region. Such developments call for renewed and expanded commitment to an Asia collecting strategy, not a diminution of it.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Edward Aspinall, FAHA

President, Asian Studies Association of Australia

On behalf of:

Dr Jacqui Baker, President, The Indonesia Council

Dr Priya Chacko, President, South Asian Studies Association of Australia.

Dr Patrick Jory, President, Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars.

Associate Professor Roald Maliangkai, President, Korean Studies Association of Australasia.

Associate Professor Beatrice Trefalt, President, Japanese Studies Association of Australia.

Professor Jane Golley, President, Chinese Studies Association of Australia

Also endorsing this letter are:

Associate Professor Sander Adelaar, FAHA (University of Melbourne)

Professor Warwick Anderson, FAHA FASSA FAHMS FRSN (University of Sydney)

Professor Ien Ang, FAHA (Western Sydney University)

Dr Greg Bailey FAHA (La Trobe University)

Associate Professor Michael Barr, FAHA (Flinders University)

Associate Professor Ruth Barraclough, director Korea Institute (ANU)

Professor David Bradley, FASSA FAHA (La Trobe University)

Dr John Butcher, FAHA

Professor Jianfu Chen, FAAL, FAHA (La Trobe University)

Dr Nicholas Cheesman (ANU)

Professor Emeritus John Clark, FAHA (University of Sydney)

Associate Professor Helen Creese, FAHA (University of Queensland)

Associate Professor Melissa Crouch (UNSW)

Professor Rafe de Crespigny, FAHA (ANU)

Professor Robert Cribb, FAHA (ANU)

Professor Helen Dunstan, FAHA (University of Sydney)

Professor Emeritus Rifaat Ebied, FAHA (University of Sydney)
Professor Louise Edwards, FAHA, FASSA, FHKAH (UNSW)
Professor Emeritus Robert Elson, FAHA (University of Queensland)
Professor Antonia Finnane, FAHA (University of Melbourne)
Professor Emeritus Nanette Gottlieb, FAHA (University of Queensland).
Professor Ying Jie Guo, FAHA (University of Sydney)
Professor Emeritus Virginia Hooker FAHA (ANU)
Associate Professor David Hundt (Deakin), editor, *Asian Studies Review*.
Professor Tamara Jacka (ANU)
Professor Emeritus Robin Jeffrey, FAHA, FASSA (ANU and La Trobe)
Professor Emeritus Ariel Heryanto, FAHA (Monash University)
Professor Emeritus Anthony H Johns, FAHA (ANU)
Professor Emerita Margaret Kartomi, AM, FAHA (Monash University)
Professor Michael Keane, FAHA (Curtin University)
Dr Elisabeth Kramer (University of Sydney), treasurer, ASAA
Professor Emeritus Ann Kumar, FAHA (ANU)
Professor Timothy Lindsey, FAHA (University of Melbourne)
Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, AM, FAHA (University of Melbourne)
Professor Kam Louie, FAHA (UNSW)
Professor Emeritus Colin Mackerras AO, FAHA (Griffith University)
Professor John Makeham, FAHA (La Trobe University)
Professor Emeritus Allan Marett, FAHA (University of Sydney)
Professor Emeritus Gavan McCormack, FAHA (ANU)
Associate Professor Kate McGregor, vice-president of the ASAA (University of Melbourne).
Professor Anne McLaren, FAHA (University of Melbourne)
Associate Professor Kama McLean, FAHA (UNSW)
Jeffrey Mellefont, Honorary Research Associate, Australian National Maritime Museum
Professor Tessa Morris-Suzuki FAHA (ANU)
Professor Marc Oxenham, FSA FAHA (ANU)
Professor Emeritus Anthony Reid, FAHA (ANU)
Professor Emeritus Craig Reynolds, FAHA (ANU)
Professor Mina Roces, FAHA (UNSW)
Professor Abdullah Saeed, AM, FAHA (University of Melbourne)
Professor Krishna Sen, FAHA (University of Western Australia)
Professor Emeritus Martin Stuart-Fox FAHA
Professor Wanning Sun, FAHA (UTS)
Professor Adrian Vickers, FAHA (University of Sydney)
Professor Emeritus James Francis Warren, FAHA (Murdoch University)
Professor Sandra Wilson, FAHA, F.R.Hist.Soc (Murdoch University)