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

Bendi Tso

*University of British Columbia*

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

**Washington, D.C.**

**22-25 March 2018**

The 2018 Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies was held on March 22-25 at the Marriot Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. This conference brought together over 3,500 attendees from diverse disciplines and included film screenings, book exhibits, photo exhibits, panel presentations, and roundtable discussions.

The conference commenced with Haejoang Cho's (Yonsei University) opening keynote address, "Generation, Reconnection, and Reciprocity: Hopes for a United

Front of Youth Precariat in East Asia," which examined the insecurity and anxiety experienced by young people in East Asia, with a particular focus on South Korea, and explored the possibility of the existence of hope for the younger generation. The following day, Katherine Bowie (University of Wisconsin, Madison) gave her presidential speech, "Palimpsests of the Past: Oral History and the Art of Pointillism." She addressed how employing oral histories could challenge historiographical paradigms and make history more democratic by scrutinizing the historical realities of the life of Kruba Srivichai (1878-1939), a famed monk in Thailand. Her approach of using oral history to study the past offered a new conceptual framework and approach for scholars of the Himalayan region, where oral history is widely regarded as a legitimate way of transmitting knowledge.

The 2018 AAS conference included various panels, roundtables, and presentations directly focusing on the Himalayan region. A sample of these sessions include: "Communist Processes and Mao-Era Policies the Ethnic Borderlands of Western China"; "Moral Economies of Language in Tibet"; "Contemporary Exiled Tibetan Politics - Driving the Narrative"; "Empire in the Himalayas: The Qing Transport and Communication System in the Qing-Gurkha War (1788-1793)"; "Straddling the Himalayas: Translating Buddhism into Chinese"; and "Identity, Dignity and Development as Trajectory: Bihar as a Model for Democratic Progress in Nepal?." It is worth mentioning that this year, Bhutan, which was not well recognized in the previous year's conference, was the focus of a two-part panel, "Words, Images, and Actions: Recent

Contributions to Bhutan Studies, Part 1 and 2." These two panels covered a wide range of topics on Bhutan, including Bhutanese literature, art history, funerary practices, religious practices, and Bhutan-Sikkim relations in the eighteenth century. The panelists also highlighted the current challenges the Bhutanese face within the context of modernization and globalization, such as the conflicts between Bhutanese spiritual beliefs towards environmental preservation and capitalist way of exploiting natural resources. The challenges also included the tension between the researchers' digitalization and documentation of endangered textual and oral resources and the resources holders' cultural authority. Each presentation contributed to a better understanding of Bhutan within the context of globalization.

Thematically, Tibetan religion, language, identity politics, and development were the major themes discussed in the conference. Several panels focused on Tibetan Buddhism as a strong religious force that has affected and shaped the cultural realities and dynamics of the Himalayan region. The panel "The Second Buddha: New Perspectives on Padmasambhava" focused on literary representations of and visual expressions about Padmasambhava, one of the most influential religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism, and contributed to a more nuanced and detailed understanding of Padmasambhava across the Himalayan region. The panel "Jewels from the Mouth of a Mongoose: Buddhist Conceptions of Value, Prosperity, and Fortune in East and Inner Asia and the Himalayas" focused on the concepts of value, wealth, fortune, and prosperity in Buddhist societies both within the

Himalayan region and beyond. Based on empirical studies in Amdo, Kham, Sikkim, and Mongolia, the panelists examined the intersection of material and spiritual affluence, and explored how local communities engaged with and mediated these ideas in the context of capitalism, modernization, and globalization. Additionally, Tenzin Dorjee's (Columbia University) presentation, "How Buddhism Strengthens—and Stifles—the Tibetan Freedom Struggle," studied the role played by Buddhism and Buddhist groups in the Tibetan freedom movement. He illuminated how, at times, Buddhism produced seemingly conflicting effects on the Tibetan nationalist movement in terms of struggle and pacifism.

Given that the Himalayan region is characterized by linguistic and ethnic diversity, and that language and ethnicity wield considerable impacts on identity politics and nation-state building, the politics of language and identity has always retained an important place in regional studies. Several sessions addressed these issues. Presenters on the panel "Communist Processes and Mao-Era Policies the Ethnic Borderlands of Western China" examined the ways in which ethnic communities in China engaged with the state-led political and cultural movements, and revealed how ethnic minorities' memories in fact challenged state-generated hegemonic narratives. The panel "Moral Economies of Language in Tibet" examined linguistic movements within Tibetan communities. Instead of simply approaching the recent linguistic protests and movements in the Tibetan Plateau as an effect of the Chinese state-led language policy, the panelists argued that Tibetans' moral economies, namely their moral reasoning and values behind

their language choices, should be included as part of analysis in order to better understand the politics of language in cultural Tibet and Tibetans' decisions on language. Himalayan residents' transnational and diasporic experiences in relation to their identity construction was also discussed. Sara M. Conrad's (Indiana University-Bloomington) presentation, "Gastro Politics in the Tibetan Diasporic Community of Jackson Heights," explored how Tibetan politics in India transcend national boundaries and affect exiled Tibetans' already highly politicized identities and lives in New York through their choice of Tibetan dumpling (*momo*) restaurants.

A number of papers examined recent development projects in the Himalayan region, focusing on their impacts on local communities. A sample of these presentations include: "Infrastructural Imaginaries: Chinese Investments and Nepal's Development Dreams" (Galen Murton, James Madison University); "Himalayan Pathways: Aspirations and the Geopolitics of Road Building in Ladakh, India" (Karine Gagne, University of Guelph); "A 'Green' Belt and Road? Small Hydropower and Large Dams on China's Southwestern Borderlands" (Tyler Harlan, University of California, Los Angeles); and "'Building Knowledge' in the Lower Himalayas: Notes from the Kangra Valley" (Siddharth Menon, University of Colorado, Boulder). Together, these scholars, on the one hand, scrutinized how development projects initiated by the state reinforced the state's presence in the Himalayan highland region, secured the national border, and remapped the regional geopolitics. On the other hand, their research offered insights into how development projects affected, disrupted, and challenged

the traditional way of people's life and how people understood and responded to these changes in different ways, which were always conditioned by their gender, caste, and class.

In addition, a number of sessions directly responded to contemporary social and political events in the Himalayan region, such as Nepal's 2015 earthquake and China's 2013 One Belt One Road project, which have affected the geopolitics within the Himalayan region and beyond. The panels "Disaster Temporalities and Subjectivities: Alternative Pasts and Possible Futures" and "Problematizing the Infrastructure Promises of China's Belt and Road Initiative" insightfully revealed how natural disasters and the state-launched initiatives not only reconfigure the geopolitics on the macro level, but also unevenly affect people's lived experience and social imaginary on the ground level. These sessions also encouraged us to explore how these various cases could speak to each other and create a deeper, more productive conversation both within and beyond the Himalayan region.

In all, the AAS conference was successful in bringing together scholars of the Himalayan region and Asia more broadly from across various disciplines to exchange intellectual ideas, establish professional networks, and initiate and deepen interdisciplinary conversations.

Bendi Tso  
University of British Columbia