

March 2020

## Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference

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### Recommended Citation

Plachta, Nadine. 2020. Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference. *HIMALAYA* 39(2).  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss2/18>



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## ***Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference***

**Denver, CO  
21-24 March 2019**

The Association for Asian Studies (AAS) is a non-profit, professional association dedicated to the study of Asia. Each spring, it hosts an Annual Conference in North America. In addition, it organizes a yearly gathering in a different country within Asia and coordinates other regional conferences and workshops to build supportive communities of Asian studies scholars and to provide its members with an active professional network around the world.

In 2019, the AAS Annual Conference was held at the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel in the city of Denver, Colorado from March 21–24. It brought together more than 3,200 scholars. According to registration numbers, the top disciplines among them were history, literature, anthropology, political science, art history, religion, and sociology. Around 760 participants were first time attendees. The conference featured 394 sessions, a book exhibit with over eighty major book publishing companies and university presses, receptions, business meetings, and much more. It was the largest Asian Studies conference of the year in North America and a must-attend event for anyone interested in the latest research on Asia.

The conference opened with a keynote address by Thant Myint-U, the former Advisor to the President of Myanmar. Thant critically reflected upon recent political reforms in Myanmar and drew attention to the country's uncertain future in regard to issues of racial violence and democratic changes.

Over the course of four days, several distinct sessions and numerous

talks featured research on Nepal, Tibet, and the Himalayan region. The contributions can be grouped into the general themes of Asian political history and nation building, Asian literary traditions, Buddhist pilgrimage and rituals, and development and social change.

Lei Lin (Harvard University) organized the panel “Trans-Regional Thought and Practice: Political Interactions Between Qing China and Colonial South Asia,” which bridged the fields of Chinese and South Asian studies by examining trans-Himalayan political connections between colonial South Asia and Qing China in the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the four presentations, Tansen Sen's (New York University Shanghai, China) talk focused on how Warren Hastings (1732–1818), the first Governor General of Bengal, contributed to the establishment of new overland and maritime linkages between British India and the Qing empire. Lei Lin considered Qing China's diplomatic attempts and strategies to build new connections across the Himalayan region during the war against Nepal in the 1790s, while Yi Li (Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom) interrogated British Indian expeditions and Chinese espionage activities along the Sino-Burmese border in the 1880s. Scrutinizing how radical political activists used explosives in attempted assassinations in India and China, Yin Cao (Tsinghua University, China) discussed the origins of political terrorism in both countries in the early twentieth century.

Besides this panel on historical geopolitical objectives, nation building, and rapprochements across the trans-Himalaya, Swati Chawla (University of Virginia) contributed to an understanding of the rise of Sikkimese nationalism in

postcolonial India after the signing of the Indo-Sikkim Treaty in 1950 by exploring the lives of the last two monarchs of the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim, Tashi Namgyal (r. 1914-1963) and Palden Thondup Namgyal (r. 1963-1975).

Several panels at the conference also focused on Asian literary traditions. Among them was “Contemporary Bhutanese Literature” organized by Holly Gayley (University of Colorado Boulder) and sponsored by the Tibet-Himalaya Initiative of the University of Colorado Boulder. The panel explored the development and transformations of different genres and works in Dzongkha and English languages, highlighting the relationship between oral and literary forms, colonial and post-colonial influences, and religious and secular themes. The panel comprised four presentations that were chaired by Kalzang Bhutia (Occidental College). In the first talk, Sonam Kinga (Royal Institute of Governance and Strategic Studies, Bhutan) presented three poems on Ugyen Wangchuck (1861-1926), the prominent Bhutanese governor and later King of Bhutan, to discuss recent efforts and challenges of making available traditional literature in contemporary Bhutan. Sonam Nyenda (Royal University of Bhutan, Bhutan) compared traditional and modern writings of the literary genres of stories (*sgrung*) and biographies (*rnam thar*) to foreground the changes in Bhutanese literature. Tshering Tamang’s (Royal University of Bhutan, Bhutan) presentation addressed the importance of Bhutanese literature written in English within the national school curriculum as a means to move away from the prevalent Indian influence in schooling and shape a new national literature and identity. Looking at the novels

*Circle of Karma* (2005) by Kunzang Choden and *Kyetse* (2017) by Chador Wangmo, Holly Gayley (University of Colorado Boulder) then explored the emergence of new Bhutanese English literature that features women as both writers and protagonists. Gayley discussed how these female authors interweave themes that reflect societal and religious challenges specific to women in a modernizing nation. The panel was rounded off by concluding remarks from discussant Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (Occidental College).

Drawing from a new book by Tulasi Srinivas (Emerson College) titled *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (2018), a roundtable considered the concept of wonder in contemporary religious traditions of South Asia. The innovative and interdisciplinary roundtable session was organized by Amanda Lucia (University of California Riverside) and benefitted greatly from the presence of the author, Tulasi Srinivas. It also featured various constructive inputs from discussants Andrea Pinkney (McGill University, Canada), Anne Mocko (Concordia College), Amanda Lucia, and Mary Hancock (University of California Santa Barbara).

While not being part of the roundtable and panel on Asian literary traditions mentioned above, Christopher Diamond (University of Washington) investigated short lyric poems written by the prominent fifteenth century Maithili poet Vidyapati and their spread from North Bihar and the Kathmandu Valley to Bengal, Assam, and Orissa.

Two paper presentations at the conference addressed Buddhist pilgrimage and rituals in Nepal and along the Sino-Tibetan-Burmese Borderlands. Taking former United

Nations Secretary General U Thant’s visit to Lumbini in 1967 as a starting point, Blayne Harcey (Arizona State University) traced the development of the Buddha’s birthplace from a little-known area in the Terai to an internationally recognized cultural heritage site and a renowned center of Buddhist pilgrimage. Keping Wu’s (Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China) talk investigated death rituals in multi-ethnic and multi-religious villages of Northwest Yunnan, showing that Animistic, Tibetan Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant beliefs and practices co-exist and complement one another despite strict regulations of the modern Chinese state.

Development and social change were other important topics. Zhaxi Duojie (University of Colorado Boulder) and Andrew Grant (Boston College), for example, organized the panel “Development and Social Change in Eastern Tibet: Beyond the Rural/Urban Binary,” which brought together paper presentations by Nancy Levine (University of California Los Angeles), Eveline Washul (Columbia University), Andrew Grant, and Zhaxi Duojie. Following the presentations, chair Andrew Fisher (Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands) and discussant Jarmila Ptáčková (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Czech Republic) led a lively discussion on the impact of government policies and development interventions on contemporary economic and social transformations across Eastern Tibet.

Other paper presentations at the conference included a talk by Roger Norum (University of Leeds, United Kingdom) who considered couple relationships between Nepalis and expatriates living in Kathmandu in the context of development and changing mediascapes.

Experimenting with photographs and computer-generated images, Nadine Plachta (Heidelberg University) interrogated how a new road in Tsum, a high-altitude valley located in Nepal's Gorkha District, alters socio-economic strategies and resource management for a borderland population. Galen Murton (James Madison University) demonstrated how infrastructure projects in Nepal routinely generate new infrastructures around them, such as border controls and tax regimes, thus ultimately serving as a vector for state power.

The 2019 Annual Conference for the first time hosted a Digital Technology Expo (DTE), where scholars demonstrated new digital technologies and their applications in research. Participants had the opportunity to learn new skills for text analysis, database building, GIS and spatial analysis, cyberinfrastructure and platforms, and social network analysis.

A Film Expo presenting 24 films on Asia successfully rounded off the program. Among them was *Drokpa: Nomads of Tibet* (2016), directed by Yan Chun Su who attended the screening for a Q&A session with the audience. Set on the high grasslands of eastern Tibet, the documentary portrayed the everyday lives of Tibetan nomads who struggle with unprecedented environmental change. Other films were *Plastic China* (2016), which captured the powerful images of landscapes covered in waste from imported plastic. *Taapar* (2018) demonstrated the sorrowful living conditions of an Indian farmer who attempts to commit suicide, and *Mother, Daughter, Sister* (2018) told the stories of four courageous Kachin and Rohingya women calling for an end to sexual violence in times of

religious crisis and conflict. *Purdha* (2018), then, skillfully narrated the life of a young Indian woman on the brink of an arranged marriage who is allowed to remove her burka in order to play on the Mumbai Senior Women's Cricket Team. All films inspired discussion about a number of salient topics, including globalization, human rights, migration, rural-urban divides, consumer cultures, climate change, and environmental protection.

For everyone who cannot wait until the next AAS Annual Conference takes place in Boston in March 2020, there is much opportunity to stay current on latest research and methodology in the field of Asian studies with AAS publications, such as the *Journal of Asian Studies* and the online blog *AsiaNow*.

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