

bringing southeast asia to the world



IN THIS ISSUE

'The Economic Crisis is far from over': An ROF roundup	2
Where in the World is the Philippines?	4
How Asia Can Save the World	5
ISEAS Director receives top Cambodian award	6
Hallyu, Beyond Soft Power and Organic Power	6
Foreign Secretary of India gives the Inaugural Lecture of the Singapore Consortium for India-China Dialogue	7
Bengal revisited	11
50 Years of the Singapore Women's Charter	11
The 2nd Asian Buddhist Film Festival	12
A Labour of Love that took Twenty Years to Make...	13

NEXT ISSUE



The making of *Lost Loves* – An interview with Director Chhay Bora

For environmental reasons, we have moved to an online newsletter.
To unsubscribe, drop us an email at admin@iseas.edu.sg.

Special screening of Cambodian film *Lost Loves* at ISEAS



"Lost Loves" tells the true story of a woman who lost most of her family during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, which oversaw the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. This is the first feature film about the Khmer Rouge by an all-Cambodian cast and crew in nearly 25 years.

Tuesday, 10 March, 10am-12.30pm

**Special Guests: Director Chhay Bora
Writer/Actress Kouv Sotheary**

‘The Economic Crisis is far from over’



ISEAS Director Ambassador K. Kesavapany (left) gives the ROF Welcome Address before Dr Jaques Attali's Keynote Speech.

BY LEE HOCK GUAN

ISEAS' ANNUAL FLAGSHIP EVENT, the Regional Outlook Forum, held this year at the Raffles Convention Centre on 12 January attracted about 400 participants from across a broad spectrum of the Singaporean community for a day of stimulating presentations and discussions. The theme for this year's forum was Repositioning Asia After the Crisis.

In his keynote speech, Dr Jacques Attali warned that the global economic crisis was far from over because the affected Western states had postponed implementing the solutions to deal with it. The sub-prime-generated economic crisis had also hastened the shift in the centre of economic concentration from the West to Asia. However, Dr Attali pointed out that the shift to Asia playing a new role and becoming an important economic partner was a long-term process. For Asia to continue with sustainable economic growth, there must be social and political stability in the region in order to attract and retain world investments and elites, and a deepening of regional economic and political integration.

While the Chinese government has introduced a series of measures to tackle the sizzling property market, Professor Sun Qian was not sure whether they would bring down the housing prices gradually,

or cause a crash. He also predicted that the Chinese economy would continue to grow, but at a lower rate of 9 per cent in 2011, with the renminbi appreciating by another 4 per cent to 5 per cent and trade tensions with the United States and Europe growing. The Indian economy, Dr Ajit Ranade believed, would continue to achieve strong growth rates in 2011 but the government was concerned with widening income inequality. Wealth and wage inequality in India reflected the fact that 18 per cent of GDP was produced by 65 per cent of the labour force as a result of the large labour force in the agricultural sector.

Dr Fernandez argued that inflation remained the key macroeconomic threat in Asia this year. Asian states would encounter a huge challenge in combating inflation while their foreign exchange rate appreciates, although it may be more gradual in 2011.



“ For Asia to continue with sustainable economic growth, there must be social and political stability in the region in order to attract and retain world investments and elites, and a deepening of regional economic and political integration. ”

– Economist Dr Jaques Attali, Keynote Speaker, Regional Outlook Forum

Dr David G Fernandez argued that inflation remained the key macroeconomic threat in Asia this year. In part, inflation was driven by strong capital inflows into the region and by food and energy prices. The CPI was expected to rise to 4.7 per cent in 2011 from 4.2 per cent in 2010. Thus, Asian states would encounter a huge challenge in combating inflation while their foreign exchange rate appreciates, although it may be more gradual in 2011. For Southeast Asia, Dr Ravi Balakrishnan claimed that the economic buoyancy resulting from the “China spillover effect” would moderate and continue to be sustained by capital inflows and credit growth. For the short-term outlook, private domestic demand was expected to be strong and would likely be the main engine of growth, especially for Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. Risks were expected to be mainly external and come from the United States and the European Union, especially for Malaysia and Thailand.

For Dr Cheong Kee Cheok, although the Malaysian economy was expected to grow by about 5 per cent for the next five years, there was a danger that it might get caught in the “Middle Income Trap”; being caught between low-wage producers and a dearth of high-technology production. The Najib administration has announced several responses to move the economy up the manufacturing ladder but, nevertheless, the continuation of affirmative action programmes, inadequate skilled manpower and weak public-sector institutions may hinder the implementation of those responses. According to Mr Anton Gunawan, business sentiment in Indonesia is currently good, with steady capital inflow remaining a good, yet problematic, issue for the government. Reflecting this positive business sentiment, growth for 2011 is expected to be at the 6 per cent level. With exports rising, but imports also remaining high, risks are expected to come mainly from the external side.

In his luncheon speech, Dato’ Seri Kalimullah bin Masheerul Hassan highlighted that, for a number of reasons, the Malaysian economy had been one of the best-performing economies in Asia until the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Since then, although the economy has grown at credible rates, it probably would have done better if not for the lack of political will to address problems which are hindering

growth. However, he believed that Malaysia had not been knocked out of the game yet and that Prime Minister Najib Razak was the last hope. He was optimistic that the Prime Minister’s reforms would work.

Professor Sheng Dingli argued that the China-US relationship would continue to be framed negatively by the American relationship with Taiwan and positively by their common interest in ensuring stability on the Korean peninsula. The concern with stability on the peninsula had been affected by the emerging problem of political succession in North Korea. Professor Yoo Ho-Yeol claimed that North Korea’s recent provocative action vis-à-vis the South could be attributed partly to Kim Jong Il’s ill health, which raised concerns over a smooth power transition and over consolidation in North Korea. As for South Asia, Professor Shrikant Paranjpe noted that if India sought to play a major global role, it would have to first ensure that order was established in its own region. The prospects of stability in South Asia in the coming years might see traditional border issues changing; other tensions would emerge increasingly; and new forms of terrorism might take shape.

Professor Thongchai Winichakul was pessimistic that the 2011 election, if it were held, would end Thailand’s present political crisis. In part, this was because confrontation was likely to escalate during the election campaigns, and even if the royalist alliance were to be consolidated and the next government were to be more stable, fundamental problems would remain and conflict would deepen. As for Malaysia, Dr Ong Kian Ming believed that the Barisan Nasional was likely to regain a two-thirds majority in the next general election but might lose power in the following general election. This, he reasoned, was because Prime Minister Najib’s economic reforms would not have filtered down to the man-on-the-street and would not have fundamentally transformed the structure of the economy. Professor Ikrar Nusa Bhakti held that the political and security condition in Indonesia would remain stable in 2011 since there would not be any major social unrest or ethnic conflict. Instead, political intrigues and conflicts would mostly take place among members of the political coalition who support the government.

Where in the World is the Philippines?

BY MOE THUZAR

BOOKS BY FORMER ASEAN Secretary-General Mr Rodolfo C Severino, who now heads the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS, are read widely for his thoughtful insights and behind-the-scenes stories of ASEAN's workings. Many in ASEAN and the international community turn to him for his candid views on ASEAN issues. The latest in his oeuvre, however, does not deal with ASEAN. The title of this book is provocative. *Where in the World is the Philippines?*, published by the Carlos P. Romulo Foundation and ISEAS in December 2010, and launched by the author in the Philippines in January 2011, gave rise to a flurry of queries on the choice of title.

The book deals with the issue of what constitutes Philippine national territory. It sets down for the record the long and complex history of legal and policy issues pertaining to Philippine territory and maritime jurisdiction, and the country's claims in the South China Sea and parts of North Borneo now known as Sabah in Malaysia.

In his article on the book for the *Philippine Star's* Opinion page (6 Jan 2011), Mr Severino shares the desire "to illuminate the facts surrounding the issues and to provide an opportunity to bring these issues closer to their resolution for the sake of the country's and its people's future." *Where in the World is the Philippines* is, therefore, valuable evidence of Mr Severino's mission throughout his stewardship of the issue as Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs.

In his review of the book, Mr Carlos Sorreta, deputy permanent representative to the United Nations and Mr Severino's former Special Assistant for Policy in the Philippine Foreign Service, recalls the days when he assisted Mr Severino in the quest to settle confusion over what constitutes Philippine territory and jurisdiction, and states that the book certainly succeeds in what Mr Severino set out to do – shed light on the complex issues. Mr Severino achieves this objective, says Mr Sorreta, with a clarity "rarely seen in one who has spent most of his life in a government bureaucracy."

Mr Severino does not provide answers to questions raised in the debate on the issue of Philippine national territory. Instead, he opens up the discussion to all those interested in and passionate about defining their national territory. By bringing it beyond the narrow confines of diplomatic and legal circles, Mr Severino has provided the background information necessary for "a more open and inclusive debate", as Mr Sorreta reflects, and for more public awareness of the issue.

Ellen Tordesillas, in her blog on Mr Severino's book, agrees. She quotes former Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo that Mr Severino "means to waken public and national interest in an issue that has been consigned to the recesses of memory and the back-burners of government files." Ms Tordesillas also provides a brief overview of the issues Mr Severino raises in the book, which she commends as one hundred and twenty three pages of well-researched discussion on the Philippines' coastal and territorial claims (in the South China Sea and in Sabah). She notes that Mr Severino urges Philippine policy makers to make up their collective minds, which he admits is something easier said than done!



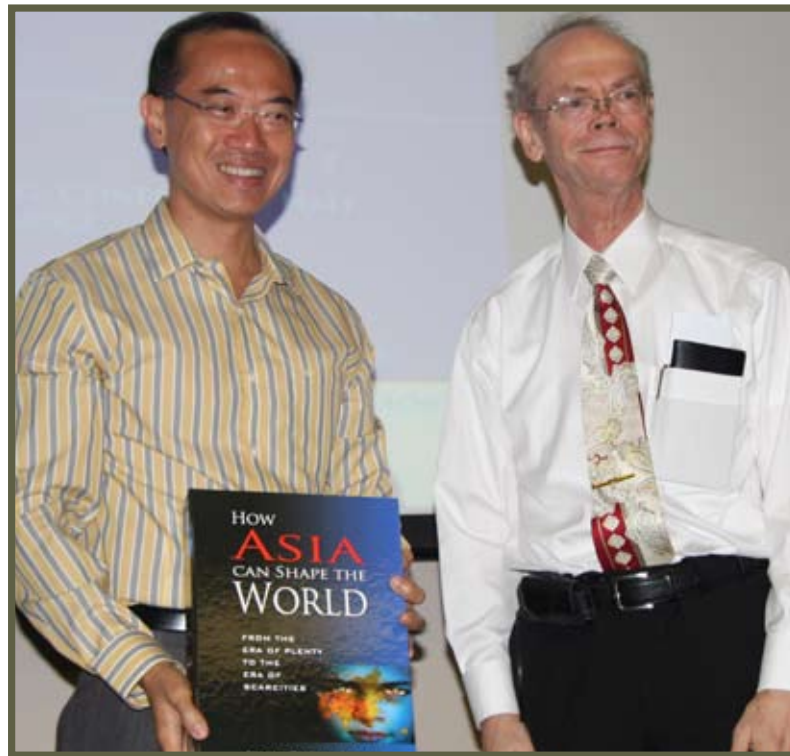
Mr Severino signing his book. Tress Reyes of Nikei Shimbun and Charmain Deogracias of NHK TV. wait for their turn. Photo courtesy: Ellen Tordesillas

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This is echoed by former Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos, former national security advisor Jose T. Almonte and former solicitor general Estelito Mendoza, who, reports Estrella Torres for the *Business Mirror* (11 January 2011), have urged the Aquino administration to address the nation's maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea. Ellen Tordesillas recommends *Where in the World is the Philippines?* as required reading for [Philippine] policy makers. We all need to be clear about, and to be able to clarify, where in the world we stand.

How Asia Can Shape the World

MR GEORGE YEO, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS WAS GUEST-OF-HONOUR AT THE RECENT LAUNCH OF *HOW ASIA CAN SHAPE THE WORLD FROM THE ERA OF PLENTY TO THE ERA OF SCARCITY* BY JOERGEN OERSTROEM MOELLER. FORMER AMBASSADOR OF DENMARK, THE AUTHOR IS VISITING SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AT ISEAS, SENIOR FELLOW, MFA DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY AND ADJUNCT PROFESSOR, SMU.



THE BOOK

Asia will redraw the map of economic progress over the next twenty-five years. Growth is necessary to solve economic and social problems, but harder to achieve as the age of plenty gives way to the age of scarcities. The challenge opens the door for an Asian economic model based on shifting of productivity from the individual to groups, ecological productivity instead of economic productivity, and a reversal to traditional Asian values – less materialistic than Western values. A new paradigm for economic thinking emerges to replace the one launched in the West 200 years ago.

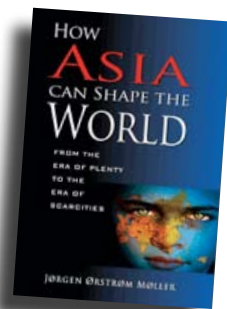
The key driver is the shift from distribution of benefits to burden sharing (a topic so far absent from economic theory). This makes the bulk of existing economic theory obsolete as it has been geared and refined over 200 years to guide politicians on the premise that more of everything is available. The American capitalism built upon 'more of everything' comes to an end with scarcities of food, commodities, energy, water, and clean environment, reinforcing each other.

The book offers an analysis of what this means and ventures into the minefield of groping for solutions – new economic thinking – and explaining why it is likely that answers, if there are any, will be found in an Asian context

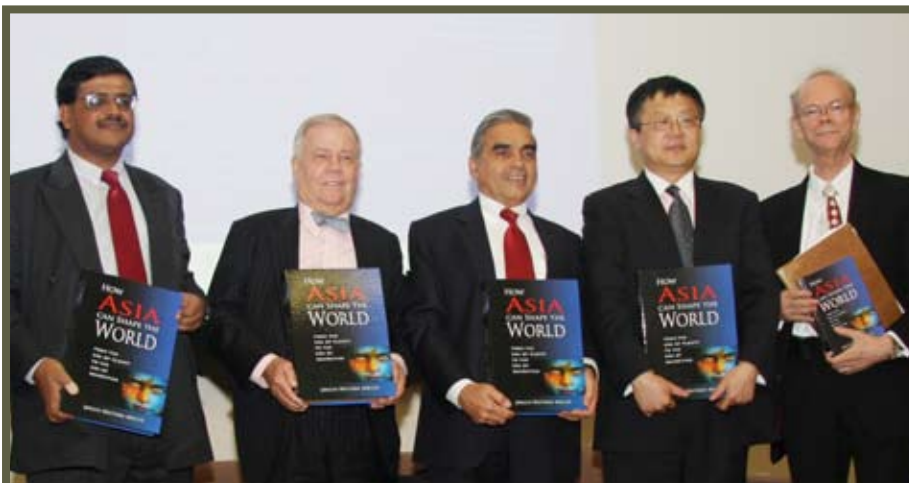


Top: The author (right) beams as Minister George Yeo launches *How Asia Can Shape the World*.

Above: Book signing at the launch at SMU.



The Panelists; from left: Rajiv Biswas, Jim Rogers, Kishore Mahbubani (Chair), Huang Jing and Joergen Moeller





ISEAS Director Receives Top Cambodian Award

ISEAS DIRECTOR AMBASSADOR K. KESAVAPANY received the Royal Order of Sahametrei, Commander Rank, from Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Dr Sok An in Phnom Penh on 26 November 2010. He was given the award in recognition of ISEAS' contribution to the promotion of better bilateral relations between Cambodia and Singapore and the Institute's reputation for scholarship and research.

That same day, Ambassador Kesavapany delivered the keynote address at a symposium on the future of ASEAN in the 21st century. Two other speakers from ISEAS were Ambassador Pou Sothirak and Ambassador Mark Hong. The symposium drew about 250 thinkers and policy-makers, members of the diplomatic corps, academics, researchers, professors and university students. Dr Sok An, who is also Chairman of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, thanked ISEAS for having organised a successful Cambodia Forum in Singapore in April 2010.

The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at ISEAS plans to collaborate with APSARA Authority, which oversees the conservation of ancient Khmer Temples, to organise an international conference on Angkor and its global connections in Seam Reap in June 2011. Also, ISEAS is working on a proposed book entitled *Cambodia in the 21st Century*, which will be timely because year marks the 20th anniversary of the Paris Peace Conference on Cambodia, held in 1991.

Hallyu – Beyond Soft Power to Organic Power



Among the speakers was Professor Park Jung Sook from KyungHee University, Korea who also happens to be an actress in one of Korea's highest-rated TV shows .

During the 2009 Commemorative Summit of the 20th anniversary of ASEAN-Korea dialogue relations, Korean and ASEAN leaders committed to stepping up efforts for consistent and active mutual cultural exchanges. Such top-down, state-led efforts to foster positive cultural relations between Korea and ASEAN are taking place against the background of a decade of increased cultural interaction between both regions, in part because of the greater regional flow of pop cultural products in Asia at large.

ISEAS organised a seminar that discussed the socio-cultural, diplomatic and economic implications of the increased cultural interchange between ASEAN and Korea, with special focus on the heightened visibility and popularity of contemporary and popular Korean culture in Southeast Asia, a phenomenon also referred to as Hallyu or the Korean Wave. Speakers examined theoretical and institutional perspectives on soft power, with attention to the Korean government's formulation of its cultural policy towards ASEAN countries in recent years, Southeast Asia's responses towards these trends, and assessed the impact of the new wave of Southeast Asian cultures that are in turn entering into Korea.

‘Rabindranath Tagore’s Vision of India and China: A 21st Century Perspective’



Prof Wang Gungwu, HE Nirupama Rao and Dr Prasenjit Duara (seated left to right) look on as Ambassador K. Kesavapany delivers the welcome address.

INDIA’S FOREIGN SECRETARY HE NIRUPAMA RAO DELIVERED THE INAUGURAL LECTURE OF THE SINGAPORE CONSORTIUM FOR INDIA-CHINA DIALOGUE. HERE ARE EXCERPTS FROM HER SPEECH.

THERE IS A HEIGHTENED FOCUS on Rabindranath Tagore today, as we engage in preparations to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth. This year it will also be 87 years since Tagore made his memorable visit to China. He went to China with a message of love and brotherhood that he felt symbolized the essence of the ties between the two countries. From all we know, his visit captured the imagination of Chinese intellectual elite, some of whom were overcome with admiration for his eloquence and passionate espousal of the civilizational strength of the East, while others especially young students in some of the Chinese leading universities, drawing directly from the ideology of the May 4, 1919 movement, were vehement in their rejection of Tagore’s critique of modern civilization.

Tagore was a visionary, always forward-looking. In one of his lectures in China in 1924, he said, “I hope that some dreamer will spring from among you and preach a message of love and therewith overcoming all differences bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages”. These were powerful words addressed to both the peoples of China and India, calling them upon them to build a deeper mutual understanding. In speaking of the need for “eternally revealing a joyous relationship unforeseen”, he sought to promote the cause of China-India understanding, envisioning the ascent of India and China to a higher platform of civilizational leadership and fraternal partnership since they together comprise 40% of humanity.

There has been some criticism that Tagore did not offer any practical solutions to the problem of the day. One could equally argue that Tagore was a visionary who thought ahead of his times and the true relevance of his thoughts were not appreciated in his era. For instance, early on he foresaw the onset of globalization. On several occasions, he had mentioned that the most important fact of the

present age was that all the races have come together and we are confronted with two alternatives. The problem is whether different groups of people can go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis for reconciliation and mutual help; and whether it will be interminable competition or cooperation. There is a striking parallel in how leaders of India and China have publicly articulated that there are areas of cooperation as well as those of competition between us, and that there is sufficient space in the world for both countries to satisfy their development aspirations and to cooperate during this process.

Tagore also pointed that in our earlier history, when the geographical limits of each country and also the facilities of communication were small, this problem of cooperation versus competition was comparatively small in dimension. Again in the context of people having come close together, Tagore mentioned that their differences in language, tradition and degrees of strength are so apparent that “our first meeting has only recognized these differences and in the place of geographical barriers it has thereupon set up the barriers of mutual understanding”. Again speaking on Asia, he said “When we in Asia talk about re-adjustment in response to the world situation today, we forget that it should be directed to a future of new ideals and not to the mere shifting about of the methods of the past.” We are today indeed grappling with these very ideas as we try to address the issue of a strategic security and cooperative framework for Asia.

Since the venue of this talk is Singapore, I cannot but help thinking of how the most evocative visualization of the synergy between India and China has often sprung from our friends in South-east Asia. And here, Singapore has played a leading role. It was in Singapore that Tan Yun-shan met Tagore and from where he resolved to follow Tagore to Santiniketan when Cheena Bhavana was being set up. It is from our friends in Singapore that we often

Since the venue of this talk is Singapore, I cannot but help thinking of how the most evocative visualization of the synergy between India and China has often sprung from our friends in Southeast Asia. And here, Singapore has played a leading role. It was in Singapore that Tan Yun-shan met Tagore and from where he resolved to follow Tagore to Santiniketan when Cheena Bhavana was being set up. It is from our friends in Singapore that we often hear the most incisive commentary and comparative analyses of modern China and India.

hear the most incisive commentary and comparative analyses of modern China and India. And, it is probably here in Singapore that you are able to best understand the imperative of closer dialogue and peaceful interaction between India and China.

Tagore's encounter with China did not culminate with his trip there in 1924. The idea of India and the idea of China – civilizations that could never perish – were guiding principles for leaders like Nehru. Until the unfortunate border conflict of 1962, the concept of fraternal partnership between India and China had never been questioned. The estrangement of the sixties and early seventies expressed an aberration that went against the grain of the inspirational words of Tagore and his belief in the geo-civilizational paradigm of India-China relations. The scholar Patricia Uberoi speaks of the post-Westphalian compact where the institution of the nation-state is defined by territorial boundedness. She writes how "with this come notions of centre and periphery, mainland and margins, and the justified use of force in their defence". Perhaps, as she says, Tagore would have thought of frontier zones as "revolving doors- as creative spaces where civilizations meet, and not as the trouble spots of contemporary geo-politics". It is that ideal of global sustainability that Tagore would have spoken to – where regional cooperation across territorial boundaries strengthens connectivities and diminishes the salience of protracted contest and conflict. Similarly the notion of intercultural give and take between India and China contradicts the theory of any clash of civilizations. This is a

useful model for Asia as we see it resurgent once again, and we seek open, transparent, balanced and equitable dialogue structures and patterns of cooperation among all the regions of our continent.

Tagore's vision of sustainability on a global scale, his cosmopolitanism, and his humanism, are of immense relevance today when we stress the values of inclusive development, and environmental sustainability as also education that creates individuals who transcend national boundaries to become citizens of the world.

Last May, I was present at Shanghai when the President of India, unveiled a bronze statue of Tagore at the crossing of Nanchang Road and Maoming Road very close to the spot where Tagore had stayed at the house of the young poet Xu Zhimo during a brief transit through Shanghai on his onward journey to Japan and North America in 1929. The event was a recognition of the enormous contribution made by Tagore in resurrecting the traditional friendship between India and China. Last month during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao to India, the Indian Government announced that the study of the Chinese language would be introduced into the curriculum of secondary schools across the country. Tagore would have been overjoyed by this resolve to promote the scientific study of China through its language.

In many ways the Nalanda University project, which arises out of the decisions reached at the East Asia Summit, is an expression of this spirit. The road to Nalanda, giver of education and knowledge, echoes with the muffled footsteps of that period of shared history between India and China when the traditions of Buddhist pilgrimage and quest of scholarship defined the reaching out of these two countries to each other. In fact, the lore of the Tang Dynasty monk's "Journey to the West" is like a trail leading to Nalanda. The tradition of Nalanda not only included monks like Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing, but also other monks and scholars, prominently among them Kumarajiva, who is claimed by both India and China as their own worthy son.

In our own century, the 21st, the Government of India has sought to revive Nalanda as a centre of cultural exchange and scholarship between East, Southeast and South Asia. The Nalanda Mentor Group headed by Dr. Amartya Sen has been working to realize the vision of a truly global university, a holistic mix of the old and the new, of the past, the present and the future. Again, Tagore's happiness at this development would have been spontaneous. It is the modern day Xuanzangs and Bodhidharmas in both our countries and indeed in the rest of Asia that this University will target – so that this ancient rendezvous comes alive once again with all its attendant relevance and meaning. We are deeply appreciative of the fact that the Singapore Buddhist community is to make a financial contribution for the library of Nalanda University amounting to 5 million US dollars. Last month, Premier Wen Jiabao announced a contribution of 1 million US dollars for the Nalanda University.

Tagore's vision of India and China was founded on the realization that the true depths of the relationship between the two countries are embedded in the cultural interaction of yore between the two countries, in the mutual quest for ideas and innovation, trade, science, and in the culture of debate. Let us not forget how the halls of Nalanda resounded with the intense debates of scholars and monks defending their interpretations of the Buddhist canon — and here the India versus China or China versus India context was not a conflicted one, but one in which there was a healthy competition embellished by the space which each side gave the other. I believe these forefathers of ours in both countries had grasped the essence of the geo-civilizational paradigm that Tan Chung speaks of.

Tagore was ultimately a breaker of barriers, and in that sense he

is very much of the 21st century. His appeal should cut across any nationalism that is narrowly defined or circumscribed by a limited appreciation of the ebb and flow of the tides of history. That sanity and rationality should prevail in the debates and encounters of countries like India and China is a principle that nobody can find exception about. Tagore's nationalism did not come in the way of the widest internationalism. This is a message for the youth of China and of India. Let their relationship flourish in the amrakunj – the mango grove – like the one at Santiniketan, a field of inspiration, with their personalities developing in harmony with the environment around them. Perhaps the theme of the amrakunj should define 2011 which is the Year of India-China Exchange!

Last month, during his visit to Delhi, Premier Wen Jiabao spoke to a cross-section of media and cultural and academic personalities on how to improve perceptions of Indians and Chinese about each other. A number of interesting observations were made. Professor Manoranjan Mohanty, the eminent Indian sinologist, spoke of the two countries establishing Panchsheel centres for cultural, educational, economic and technological cooperation. One participant described the urgency of the need for changes in perceptions of each other and the gap that needs to be bridged. One of our film makers proposed joint ventures in film making which would resolve the alienation caused by 1962. One Chinese participant described Nalanda and Tagore as important icons for India and China. Yet another Chinese participant underlined the need for people from the two countries to understand each other directly rather than through the western prism, in an echo of Tagore! What came through was the need for an inclusive and plural approach given the multi-ethnic nature of both societies. The need for the two countries to evolve as hubs of creativity, in addition to being engines of economic growth, was stressed by Premier Wen. Rediscovering their civilizational ties not only on the basis of historical traditions but in the contemporary context through youth and technology was essential.

It is a truism that between two such large countries as ours, relations will be complex and with continuing areas of divergence. The challenge remains to build more convergence and common ground. I believe that the ballast must come from deeper dialogue which is defined by greater understanding of the relevance and import of the words of thinkers like Tagore.



India and China share what is termed as a strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity today. Their relations have, in the last decade particularly, grown increasingly multi-faceted. These two big economies of Asia are interacting closely with each other, both in terms of bilateral trade, but also on issues concerning the global economic situation. The two governments have decided to institute a strategic economic dialogue as a measure of the increasing complexity and sophistication of their dialogue on economic issues.

It is a truism that between two such large countries such as ours, relations will be complex and with continuing areas of divergence. The challenge remains to build more convergence and common ground. I believe that the ballast must come from deeper dialogue which is defined by greater transparency, understanding the relevance and import of the words of thinkers like Tagore, realizing that a conflicted or contest-ridden relationship between India and China can do neither any good, that peace and stability for an Asian century flows from the enduring strength of a well-functioning interaction between these two countries. The concept of Zhongguo-Yin Da Tong – or “Great Harmony between India and China” can describe the future of our relations, if we use not only our complementarities in development and economic growth but also our great strengths in cultural and civilizational values, thus emerging as hubs of creativity and innovation, to create a fitting new paradigm for the India-China equation.

A jilted city, Nobel Laureates and a surge of memories – all in one Tagorean day

BY ASAD-UL IQBAL LATIF

KOLKATA IN DECEMBER is a city of conferences. An international conference on Rabindranath Tagore, held there in mid-December last year, stood out nevertheless. It was the fourth and concluding parley in a series of meetings that had begun at Harvard and travelled to Singapore and Beijing. The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) at ISEAS had organised the Singapore leg of the conferences. The final conference, organised by the Netaji Research Bureau and the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art, took place as a build-up to the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore – Bengal's favourite literary son, India's national poet, and the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Present at the finale was Minister George Yeo, ISEAS Chairman Prof Wanf Gungwu, ISEAS Director Ambassador K Kesavapany, NSC Head Prof Tansen Sen, myself and others.

The day before the conference began, a group of about two dozen participants visited Santiniketan, a town in West Bengal's Birbhum district that houses Viswa-Bharati University, which Tagore set up. The university and his own presence at Santiniketan turned a provincial town into a major place of secular pilgrimage for those interested in advancing world understanding through scholarship, art and literature. The itinerant participants, drawn from China, Japan, the United States, Singapore and India itself, cheerfully followed the almost-century-long Tagore trail to Santiniketan. For many, it was the first trip. For me, it was a brief return to a place that I had first visited as a teenager in the 1970s, long before I had arrived in Singapore in 1984.

As the coach for Santiniketan left the Taj Bengal Hotel in Kolkata, I heard the police pilot car turn on the siren. This was in honour of Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo, who was travelling to Santiniketan before delivering the keynote speech at the conference. Kolkata's traffic, as adversarial as its politics, parted magically, and the coach took off on the nearly 200-km-long trip to Santiniketan. A convoy of back-up cars followed the coach as it sped along. I glowed in the borrowed glory of the dignitaries with whom I was sharing the journey.

The companionship of the police brought back memories of my years as a journalist with The Statesman newspaper in Kolkata. Once, in the early 1980s, protesting junior doctors had confined a senior hospital official to his room, in a pressure tactic called a *gherao*, to extract concessions from the government. The police were sent in to break up the *gherao*, in the course of which a six-foot-tall plainclothes policeman wielding a baton chased away the journalists trying to cover the event. It was not a nice way to make friends with the media. But here I was now, enjoying the hospitality



'Surrounded by luminaries, I try my best to hide behind Ambassador Pany.'

Front row, left to right: K Kesavapany, Sugata Bose, George Yeo, Wang Gungwu. Back row, left to right: Asad-ul Iqbal Latif, Prasenjit Duara, Tansen Sen, Wang Bangwei

of the same police force and remembering the same doctors, many of whom were as proficient at reciting Tagore (and quoting Marx) as they were at performing a tracheostomy and organising a *gherao* (a form of protest common in Bengal where officials are surrounded till demands are met). There is almost nothing in Kolkata from which you can take out Tagore. Even the sewers begin to sing the moment two lovers remember a line of his.

I tried to hum a Tagore song, but could not, for my heart was heavy with the faded claims of the city that I had left more than 25 years ago. Jilted streets and rebuffed localities accosted me. "You've left me for Orchard Road, haven't you? Cheat!" College Street said. She spoke fiercely, as if I had been in love with her. I had. "That is nothing," Park Circus interjected accusingly. "He grew up here. Now he is growing old without me. But look, I am still young without him." Mercifully, the route to Santiniketan by-passed these roads and places; otherwise, they would have plucked me from the very coach. As it passed through Hooghly district, my ancestral home, too, remained out of sight. However, it glanced at me reproachfully over the same fields where the fathers of today's farmers had tilled the familial soil when I had been a child. "Won't you come in at least for a cup of tea?" my grandfather's house taunted me. "Or am I too humble for the distinguished company you are in?" I could take it no more. "It is you who pushed me away, you who rejected me, you whose spacious lives and roaming loves had no room for me," I cried. "How dare you mock me now?" I shouted, looking them directly in the eye. It was a noiseless shout but it woke me up. I had been dozing.

My mood improved considerably when we arrived in Santiniketan. Our group was ushered into the residence of another Bengali Nobel laureate, the economist Amartya Sen of Harvard, who has written on Tagore with fellow-traveller's grasp of Indian reality. Professor Sen welcomed us to his sprawling lawn, where we sat in a Socratic circle, ate Bengali savoury shingara and drank tea and coffee. Engaging us in conversation that was banter one moment and heavy the next, he moved effortlessly from anecdotes of family history that lay spread across the great house, to the academic mysteries of Harvard, to the altogether different urgency of the situation in Myanmar. Professor Sen's passionate commitment to the life of the mind, and the conversational energy and verve with which he conveyed it, held us spellbound for the better part of the hour, till it was time to move unwillingly on to our other appointments.

At Cheena Bhavana, ancient history put recent history in its dyspeptic place. A bibliophile's paradise, the centre exudes an almost physical craving for the cultural closeness that China and India displayed in the long centuries preceding their short-lived war of 1962. The dusty smell of the elderly books evoked the earthy steps of those who had sought to bring the two civilizations closer. We moved closer to the soul of the great poet, an avid international traveller himself, during our visit to the Tagore Museum. The

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photographs and other artefacts housed there are simple enough for a child to understand and profound enough for her to grow up on. I am not growing up but growing old, but I felt embarrassingly young as we headed out of the building for lunch and the return journey to Kolkata. I had retraced a part of my life in the course of a Tagorean day.

You can take a Bengali out of Tagore's Bengal: You cannot take Bengal's Tagore out of him.

50 Years of the Singapore Women's Charter

IT HAS BEEN 50 YEARS SINCE THE SINGAPORE WOMEN'S CHARTER WAS ENACTED. THIS IS ONE STATUTE THAT AFFECTS US ALL, REGULATING SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE LIVES OF SINGAPOREAN WOMEN AND MEN. TO CELEBRATE HALF A CENTURY OF THIS SEMINAL PIECE OF LEGISLATION, THE INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES IS LAUNCHEING TWO BOOKS THAT EXPLAIN HOW THE CHARTER AFFECTS OUR LIVES IN SO MANY FUNDAMENTAL WAYS.



THE SINGAPORE WOMEN'S CHARTER: 50 QUESTIONS

BY LEONG WAI KUM
Faculty of Law, National
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SINGAPORE WOMEN'S CHARTER: ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND RIGHTS IN MARRIAGE

**EDITED BY THERESA
DEVASAHAYAM**
Gender Studies Programme, ISEAS



The Women's Charter was enacted 50 years ago through a process that began in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Singapore in 1960. Of all the statutes that apply in the Republic of Singapore, the Women's Charter may be even more important for members of the public to become familiar with as it regulates us in some of the most important events in our lives and of our relationships with our closest relatives. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the enactment of this statute, Leong Wai Kum presents answers to 50 questions one might ask of the Women's Charter.

THE CHAPTERS IN THIS BOOK are an assembly of commentaries by a distinguished team of specialists on the social impact of the Singapore Women's Charter – the main legislation protecting women's rights in the context of the family in Singapore. There has been ongoing discussion on the implications of the Charter on the lives of Singaporean women and men since its implementation. The purpose of this book is to enrich our understanding of this legislation further – its objectives, efficacy and shortfalls.

The 2nd Asian Buddhist Film Festival seeks cultural interconnectivities

BY JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE

DURING THE TWO WEEKS BEFORE SINGAPORE'S celebration of Vesak Day there is usually an array of events that express the diversity of the Buddhist way – watching films is one of the most delightful ways to learn. The 2nd Asian Buddhist Film Festival, co-organised by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, will be held from May 5-8, 2011 showing cutting-edge films set in diverse contexts and providing an opportunity to connect with a great variety of Asian societies and lifestyles.

Mr Khaw Boon Wan, Minister for Health will be the Guest-of-Honour at the Opening of the Festival. One out of three people in Singapore is Buddhist, but this film festival is for everyone. This year's festival will include films from Bhutan, the PRC, Hong Kong, Japan, Sri Lanka, and the United States. *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010) is set in Hong Kong and portrays the struggles of a family to retain its values in a modernizing world while Neten Chokling's *Brilliant Moon: Glimpses of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche* (2010) is a documentary about the life and extraordinary achievement of a monk who went into exile in 1959 but who, despite great difficulties, continued to practice and teach with great intensity. It is beautifully narrated by actor Richard Gere and rock star Lou Reed.

Another documentary focuses on the great 20th-century Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki, a highly accomplished writer who brought Zen Buddhism into the 20th Century. Suzuki touched the hearts and minds of avant-garde writers, musicians, and scholars until Zen became a household world in the United States.

Among the many other inspiring films in this year's line-up, there

are two films that help us understand Buddhist teaching from the point of view of women. *Sky Dancer* (2010) is set in a remote area of the Tibetan plateau and is centred on the compassionate and masterful teacher Khandroma Kuzang Wangmo. She is famous for having brought dharma to her Chinese and Tibetan students in vivid and "enlightening" ways. *Uppalavanna* (2007) is a strikingly original film set in war-torn Sri Lanka. This drama treats violence, and the human passions that cause it, in an insightful way suggesting that the path of non-hatred is difficult but worthwhile in a society that very often promotes the spirit of vengeance. The nun Uppalavanna faces a dilemma when an injured man who has committed political violence seeks her help. The film gives audiences an intimate glimpse into the lives of monastic nuns, who must balance spiritual discipline with ordinary community relations at all times.

What is the Asian Buddhist Film Festival? The Asian Buddhist Film Festival (ABFF) is a Singapore-based Film Festival which was conceived with the primary objective of highlighting and provoking deeper thought on human and social issues utilising principles found in almost all religions and certainly found in Buddhist philosophy so that we may promote peace within our multi-religious society and beyond. The festival will have much to offer both the Buddhist and non-Buddhist populace in Singapore. The festival aims to reach out to a wide spectrum of viewers, young and old. Our diverse selection of films will appeal to an international audience interested in Buddhist themes -- Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

The inaugural ABFF was held in May 2007 and it was a huge success and very well received by the public with tickets sold out at all the screenings. It provided a surplus S\$40,000 to the Founders of ABFF to donate to the President's Challenge as well as the Children's Cancer Foundation.

One out of three people in Singapore is Buddhist, but this festival is for everyone. These cutting-edge films are set in diverse contexts, and so the festival is an opportunity to connect with and learn about a great variety of Asian societies and lifestyles.

