Asia Alliance

The European Alliance for Asian Studies is a cooperative framework of European institutes specializing in Asian Studies.

The Asia Alliance Partners are:

IIAS (secretariat Asia Alliance)
The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is an independent research institute established in 1993 by Dutch universities and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, to encourage Asian Studies in the humanities and social sciences and to promote national and international scientific cooperation in these fields. The IIAS is mainly financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences.

Director: Prof. Wim Stokhof

NIAS
The Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) is an independent research institute funded by the governments of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden through the Nordic Council of Ministers. The NIAS, founded in 1967, serves as a focal point for research on contemporary Asia and for promoting Asian Studies in the Nordic academic community.

Director: Dr Jørgen Delman

IFA
The Institute of Asian Affairs (Instytut Asjatycki, IFA) was founded in 1956 on the initiative of the German Parliament and the German Foreign Ministry. The Institute has been assigned the task to study the political, social, and cultural development of Asian countries. Its field of activity concentrates on contemporary affairs, while aiming to procure and broaden scientifically based knowledge of the region and its countries.

Director: Dr Werner Draguhn

EIAS
The European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) is a Brussels-based policy and research think-tank supported by the European Union (EU) institutions, which aims to promote understanding and cooperation between the EU and Asia. EIAS seeks to provide information and expertise to the European Union institutions, the academic world and business by disseminating concise, coherent and scientifically based analyses.

Director: Dr Willem van de Zee

AEC
In Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (Sciences-Po), the Asia-Europe Centre is the third pillar with the Nordic institute and the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) is a Brussels-based policy and research think-tank supported by the European Union (EU) institutions, which aims to promote understanding and cooperation between the EU and Asia. EIAS seeks to provide information and expertise to the European Union institutions, the academic world and business by disseminating concise, coherent and scientifically based analyses.

Director: Dr David Camroux

In Fundazione Fondazione Nationale delle Scienze Politiche (CNWS). The workshop was convened by Freek Colombijn and Peter Nas with secretarial assistance from Marsha Wünsch and Anja van der Meulen.

IIAS Newsletter | #30 | March 2003

Directors of Urban Change in Asia and Europe

As the absolute and relative numbers of Asians living in cities are ever increasing, the population of countless Asian cities has reached over a million residents and some cities already have more than ten million inhabitants. The need to build something distinctive is evident to organize a workshop on the so-called ‘directors of urban change’. These ‘directors’ may be defined as actors with clear ideas about urban development and who are in a position to formulate and influence future developments. Two major questions are, then, to be asked: (1) what do the directors of new urban developments envisage for the future; and (2) how do the directors manage to realize their ideas? In dealing with these questions at the workshop ‘Directors of urban change’, most participants chose to discuss the current development of one or two Asian cities.

By Freek Colombijn & Peter J. M. Nas

Whereas, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe was the continent where most of the largest cities were to be found, today eight Asian locations figure prominently on the list of the fifteen largest cities in the world: Shanghai, Tokyo, Beijing, Bombay, Calcutta, Jakarta, Seoul, and Madras. Their unprecedented rate of population growth and absolute population figures, ranging from twelve to twenty-three million inhabitants, pose considerable problems for their directors of urban change, problems that the European cities were never forced to face.

In order to enrich the comparative perspective, the workshop also invited papers on the European cities of London, Rome, and Cologne and on medium-sized Asian cities, including some relatively small national capitals, such as Colombo and Kuala Lumpur. Small as they may be (Colombo having a population of less than a million inhabitants, pose considerable problems for their directors of urban change, problems that the European cities were never forced to face.

A directly tangible result of the work of the workshop organizers attempt to draw firm conclusions, but a few tentative general observations can already be made: Directors of urban change are competing for (international) investments. One way to attract investors is by creating an imaginative, spectacular, yet functional cityscape. Upon joining the regional or global competition for investors, urban administrators must comply with international standards of what is supposedly an imaginative architecture; cityscapes thus tend to become uniform. Yet, ironically, for their city to be distinct from others, the urban administrators need to come up with something divergent from standard architecture. Local and provincial city administrators and national governments, making a showcase of their respective national capitals, are locked in this paradox. Also, real estate developers involved in housing projects face the same dilemma, torn between fulfilling universal requirements and the need to build something distinctive. It is a paradox that also lies at the root of the ‘chains of aspiration’ noted above.

Another issue is that directors of urban change of all sorts, including the urban administration, the national government, real estate developers, the president’s wife, and grassroots NGOs, show no intention of cooperation. Their clashing visions, or indeed complete lack of vision of how to develop a city, generally result in a rather disorderly end product. More than anywhere else, perhaps, this is the case in cities situated in countries going through a transition from a strict regime to a more liberal (capitalist) economy. Examples can be found in Tehran, Nanking, the Pearl River Delta, and Hanoi.

Can the natural environment be considered a director of urban change? One author’s case in point, though stretching the concept a little too far, was quite well made. Issues of waste-water and solid waste management, land subsidence due to over-extraction of ground water (leading to regular floods), and badly polluted air are increasingly being addressed, especially in mega-cities.

As a follow-up to the workshop, conveners Freek Colombijn and Peter Nas, in close cooperation with some of the participants, are trying to acquire funds to develop the workshop’s theme into a research programme with junior scholars, with the hope that specific themes relating to the concept of directors of urban change may then be elaborated in subsequent workshops.

By Freek Colombijn

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Editors’ note>

This ASEF/Alliance workshop received grants from: ASEF-Asia Alliance, Leids Universiteits Fonds (LUF); Social Science Research Council of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO-MaGW); and Research School of Asian and American Studies (CNWS). The workshop was convened by Freek Colombijn and Peter J. M. Nas with secretarial assistance from Marsha Wünsch.

For agenda details of all ASEF/Alliance workshops, please check this issue’s Conference Agenda (p.54–55) or visit www.asia-alliance.org/workshops