

## ***Asian Law Online Launch***

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I want to repeat the words that describe the *Asian Law Online* system. The words are “This will be [is] the world’s largest bibliographical database of English language holdings of Asian law.” Then it gives the website address. “It will be available without charge [very important] to students, scholars, practitioners and anybody else who wishes to use it. The database has taken five years to develop and we believe [I agree] there is no other resource of its kind anywhere in the world. [And then Tim kindly adds] You will recall, of course, that the idea was first conceived over lunch at [our house, Barry’s and mine] in Braidwood, half a decade ago!” Now what I want to stress here are the words “largest” and that it is here in Australia. A nation that only has 22 million people, but we have the largest Asian law database, that it is indeed on Asian law. Now that is a very specialised subject but it’s here. And finally, that it’s available to the public as a service, and I think that is truly amazing.

Now traditionally, we used to think of Centres outside Australia as Centres for Asian law, but this database should make us think again. I’m going to get slightly historical here because I think that the fact that the database is here is partly explained by the history of studies of Asia in Australia. A great deal of it has gone on here, in Melbourne, and the rest in Sydney and I have to say some has also gone on in Canberra, at the Australian National University. So Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney – very important centres.

Now Australian interests in Asia, and we all know that that is such a broadbrushed term, is of very longstanding. We can think of Makassari’s visits, Indonesians from South Sulawesi, who were contacting Northern Australians well before the 19<sup>th</sup> century and trading there. We can think of Chinese coming here for various purposes, including gold, but also establishing small businesses. There is one still flourishing in my hometown of Braidwood, New South Wales. Japanese was studied at Sydney University at the time of World War I, the first Asian language to be taught anywhere in Australia. You might not know the first bucket dredge for mining tin in Malaysia came from an Australian firm, the Miles family in Tasmania. And in non-government areas, there were links between Australia and Asia in philosophy, in trade unions, the Communist party, Christian groups (from one extreme to another), and even the ships that travelled between England and the Dominions, the P&O liners that stopped in Colombo, Singapore and so on. But then, World War II happened and Pearl Harbour occurred. Things were never the same again. The Japanese invaded Malaya and the unthinkable happened – Singapore fell.

With that, the strategic aspect of the relationship between Australia and Asia comes to the fore and it has never entirely disappeared. During that time of turmoil in the 1940s,

colonial families from India, Burma, Indo-China and especially from Malaya, fled to Australia and provided intelligence reports to centres here in Melbourne which provided the basis for allied landings and parachute drops back into Southeast Asia. It began to be realised that knowledge of Asian societies, of languages and cultures, was extremely important, and so after the war in the 1950s, diplomats training in Australia began to be taught about Asian societies very seriously.

Now that led into the 1960s, where the universities in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra and the new Monash, which I joined in the late 1960s (Charles Coppel was there), they built up studies of Asia. And there were some dedicated lobbyists – the late and beloved Herb Feith, the still-living and much beloved John Legge and Jamie Mackie, and the much alive Merle Ricklefs – all of whom had first-hand experience of Southeast Asia and they lobbied the government hard and often for funding. Now they were helped by other events, such as the confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia, to which Australia contributed forces, and the Vietnam War. These events unfortunately proved that strategic interests were still vital, but they helped keep government interest well and truly alive.

About that time, in the early 1970s, there were a series of education enquiries into Asian studies in Australia and for some reason or other I was involved in nearly all of them. For example, one of the first was the Auchmuty report into teacher training. Associate Professor Tim Lindsey, I suggest, is a beneficiary of that, because he learnt Indonesian at school. That was really considered a most amazing thing, that schools were teaching Asian languages to Australian children. Later, in the 1970s, there was the Fitzgerald (Stephen Fitzgerald) enquiry into the state of Asian studies in the Australian education system and out of that, came the term 'Asia literacy', and a lot of you will still remember that term. But a direct descendant of that enquiry is Asialink, here in the Sidney Myer Asia Centre. Later, in the late 1980s, there was the Ingleson enquiry, which I was quite closely connected with. It was decided as a result of that enquiry that it would be good to embed Asian studies in all areas of study. For example, students in mathematics and science should learn about Asian systems of science and mathematics, engineers should learn more about Borobudur and so on. That is, the principle was we shouldn't be separating out Asian studies, they should be part of other disciplines, not confined to just being called Asian studies.

One of the best features of the Ingleson enquiry was a series of postgraduate scholarships for any postgraduate, not just Asian studies, any postgraduate who needed an Asian language to conduct their research. They were paid to study in-country for a year and acquire language. People like Ed Aspinall and Greg Fealy, I am told, took that up and they're now leading scholars in the field. This was a highly effective strategy for enabling non-Asianists to catch up on Asian skills. Those scholarships have ended and I think that is a great loss, but what I wanted to stress was that it takes time and it takes money to train people who have both the language and the discipline training to conduct meaningful research.

Here I have to make a critical and crucial observation. Current education policies on both sides of politics are pushing for quicker PhD completions. The completion time now is supposed to be under four years, which will allow no time for funding that specialist kind of study I described, of properly acquiring the ability to research in an Asian language. Ladies and gentlemen, the many works on this database that you are about to see, were written by people whose knowledge took far more than four years to gain,

the limit now set for those PhD completions. Learning Chinese, for example, to the level of being able to read complex legal documents plus acquiring the analytical skills to describe the significance of those documents, takes many, many years. We should reward highly those individuals who dedicate themselves to that kind of work.

Now the database being launched tonight illustrates several important connections. For example, it's going to link legal skills with specialist Asian knowledge. It's linking the work of this energetic and imaginative Asian Law Centre with other Centres around not only the country, but the world. It's linking students with very important sources, but most importantly perhaps, it's linking academic research with the wider sphere. It's making specialist knowledge available to anyone who needs it, without charge. Increasingly, universities are seeking partnerships with the private sector, with government and with the community, and this project achieves all those aims. Everyone connected with it must be congratulated.

The database, according to the blurb, acknowledges the relationship between laws and their social contexts, so the material also includes works on history, economy and society, for example. But just thinking of the law itself, in Australia at least, it is ever widening its horizons. For example, of intellectual property, of environment, of finance, of maritime law, of aerospace law, of terrorist law, of insurance and so on. The database, quite clearly, must grow and keep growing.

To conclude, I have referred to earlier Asian studies enquiries in Australia, and each of them has tried to assess the effects of various educational policies. It seems that in this year, in 2002, we can see the results of the earlier investment made over 20 or 30 years. Let me list just some of the employment destinations for you of graduates who have come through learning about Asia. These were from the ANU, but I'm sure you have equally exciting examples. One of our graduates is personal assistant to a Japanese underworld boss. I understand no tax is paid in Australia. Another advises Japanese banks, one works from Sydney selling race horses to Japan. In Singapore and Malaysia (this gets a bit boring), several are well-placed in local legal firms and in Bangkok, others report for Asian media corporations. One of my PhD students is about to move to Hong Kong as a specialist editor and another is in Jakarta joining a U.S.-sponsored aid advisory team, another actually works for U.S. intelligence in Jakarta. There are many actually working in Timor. These are Australians who are fluent in Asian languages and they have combined those skills with professional qualifications. They're highly intelligent and resourceful but, you'll notice, they've had to leave Australia to find work.

Returning to this database, however, it is something that has stayed in Australia but it is available to the world and I think that is really incredible. On behalf of all of you, I want to congratulate Tim Lindsey, Pip Nicholson, Kathryn Taylor, and then Chris, Kerstin, Kissana, Jema, Pepe, Simon, Stewart and Andrey. I think it's a fantastic achievement and even without the champagne, I'm very proud to be able to launch it.